

Actions to Take When There is a Lack of Union Support for My Safety Management System

Does your organization struggle with gaining union support for your safety management system (SMS)? The lack of a strong partnership between management and union representatives not only negatively affects your SMS, but also safety and health (S&H) programs, your organization's culture, the ability to achieve S&H goals, and your overall mission.

If your organization experiences a lack of union support, stop and ask, WHY? This one pager discusses ways to gain union support and help your organization establish a better, more cooperative, and more involved SMS.



ENHANCE COMMUNICATION

A lack of communication results in distrust, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings in your management-labor relations. Email communications alone are not enough! If you have SMS-related issues with your union partners, arrange a meeting between management and union representation to openly discuss the SMS and overall employee S&H. Use this meeting as your starting point to identify issues, resolving them if possible. Set aside equal time for both management and union personnel to express their concerns and viewpoints, ask questions, and provide feedback. Create a list of the issues identified during the meeting so you can review them and develop solutions.

SEEK UNION INVOLVEMENT

Not including the union in meetings, communications, activities, and S&H-related decisions strains the management-labor relationship. Treat the union like a true and equal partner by inviting union representatives to SMS- and S&H-related meetings and activities. Having union participation gives you the opportunity to: present and discuss particular S&H issues and concerns; gain valuable input and perspectives in terms of how anticipated SMS changes may affect employee S&H; and get opinions and feedback regarding decisions with potential to affect workplace S&H. Use teamwork to discuss SMS issues and devise strategies for continuous improvement.

Consider getting approval from both top leaders and the union before sending out email communications related to your SMS or S&H. You could even send it on their behalf! Doing so shows joint effort and backing for the emailed topic or announcement. Additionally, as a courtesy, consider copying union representatives on other SMS emails and communications to keep them in the loop. These actions go a long way in developing a strong partnership.

WHY do you have a lack of union support for your SMS?

Common Issues

- Poor communication
- Misunderstanding or misinterpreting what an SMS is
- Personality conflicts
- Union not feeling like a true and equal partner
- Differences in priorities
- Use of S&H as a bargaining chip
- Procrastination on key topics from the organization

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BE PROACTIVE AND SHARE SMS INFORMATION

Anticipate your union's interests and concerns by proactively sharing SMS and S&H information with the union – don't make them ask for it. Provide periodic updates on S&H initiatives, goal progression, reported S&H issues, and plans to improve S&H. Tell the union how they can help contribute to and improve the SMS, too. Updating them on key information helps show how management believes the union is a need-to-know partner regarding the SMS.

TAKE UNION FEEDBACK SERIOUSLY

Listening to the union's concerns, inputs, and suggestions is important, but taking action shows the union is a valued partner in the SMS. This step is essential in maintaining a good relationship!

Think about the last 5–10 suggestions your union provided on S&H improvements or changes...did you address or implement any of them? Did you provide direct feedback to the union on how you are moving forward with their suggestion, or why it's not being used?



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You don't have to use every recommendation submitted; however, consistently ignoring or disregarding suggestions makes anyone (the union or your employees) feel undervalued and like they wasted their time, especially if the union thinks the change is necessary for employee S&H. Take all suggestions seriously and provide feedback on the status of each suggestion. Be ready to provide a reason for why action won't be taken on a given suggestion.

PROVIDE THE PITCH FROM THE RIGHT PEOPLE

If the union does not agree with management's choice of an SMS, it may be useful to set up a meeting to discuss the SMS decision making process. Use this meeting to justify why the organization selected the SMS and to educate union representatives on the SMS criteria and how it will improve employee S&H. Have leadership explain their reasoning and express their support for the SMS. You might even have other organizations speak about successfully implementing the SMS and the benefits both the organization and their employees experienced. Give the union time to voice opinions and ask questions to better understand their roles, the goals of the SMS, and the organization's goals going forward.

USE A MUTUALLY AGREED UPON NEUTRAL THIRD PARTY, IF NECESSARY

On rare occasions, communications may reach an impasse, productive discussions are no longer possible, or working together to plan for and resolve S&H- and SMS-related issues and concerns becomes one-sided. Work with management and seek guidance from Human Resources, or a mutually agreed upon third party, to facilitate meetings and discussions. The role of this neutral third party is to help both sides consider all issues and come up with solutions. If this remediation fails, formal arbitration may be needed.

For additional information on the SMCX's services, please visit the SMCX-hosted website at: <https://www.smcx.org/>.