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Supporting Safety Culture in Academia: Giving a Voice to Faculty

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In the words of Sir Winston Churchill, "The difference between mere management and true leadership is communication." Department leaders have a vital role to play at all institutional levels when it comes to achieving an optimal safety culture that promotes safety voice behavior.

At the university level, this role is to help the university develop a solid foundation that will support a strong safety culture. At this level, it can be a challenge to mobilize and sustain the necessary resources to effectively develop and communicate a clear, consistent message that is aligned with implicit and explicit reward structures.

At the department level, there is a responsibility to foster a positive unit-level work environment that facilitates the enactment of university-level safety standards. The challenge here is for department chairs and leaders to serve as a boundary spanner between the university administration and department members in a way that establishes and maintains consistent a work environment. Ideally, this balancing act will ensure that the department meets the safety specific and non-safety specific needs and goals (although we argue that beyond face value, all needs and goals are safety-specific) of both groups.

Finally, at the individual level, department leaders must make the desired safety voice behavior the easiest choice for all department members. The challenge is to help individual department members navigate a complex organizational landscape in a way that allows for the prioritization of safety goals amongst all other goals competing for attention, time, and effort. Below you will find best practices derived from the literature on safety culture and safety voice to meet the challenges at each level(1-5). We hope that you will employ these strategies within your own institutions.

University level:

- Develop a clear, effective safety management and reporting system with formal inclusion of input from faculty, staff, and students
- Provide an anonymous venue for communicating concerns in a structured manner: specific concern, identify facts, provide reasoning, offer possible solutions
- Clearly and effectively communicate safety voice expectations and both encourage and reward desirable voice behavior
- Provide effective training on safety skills/competencies for faculty, staff, and students that presents them with safety challenges and discusses near misses
- Develop formal and informal university leaders to be safety role models, and provide them with tools for having effective safety conversations (such as https://www.osha.gov/safeandsound/docs/SHP_Better-Safety-Conversations.pdf or https://www.digicast.com.au/hs-fs/hub/59176/file-15741271-pdf/docs/enhancing_safety_culture_through_effective_communication.pdf)

- Develop incentive systems that reward desirable voice behavior and discourage undesirable voice or silence behavior
- Establish and implement consistent yet flexible policies/procedures so that written policy matches what is done in practice
- Openly acknowledge any systems of power that prioritize financial status or reputation and work at the expense of workplace safety; a balance toward prioritization of workplace safety will positively influence financial status and reputation in the long run
- Improve a sense of organizational justice through open communication and fair distribution of rewards/punishments
- Remain open and curious to all safety-related feedback related and avoid knee-jerk reactions of defensiveness or silencing
- Encourage departments with innovative safety voice strategies to share their stories and lessons learned

Department level:

- Develop high quality relationships with faculty and department staff that facilitates open communication
- Develop a sense of safety comradery amongst department members
- Acknowledge the tendency toward normalization of deviance and design and implement appropriate mitigation mechanisms
- Develop psychological safety by modeling and rewarding vulnerability in communication
- Provide faculty, staff, and students the opportunity to fully and safely express voice both during critical moments and at regular intervals
- Ask department members for their ideas on solving, and encourage teamwork in developing solutions
- Establish departmental norms of sharing ideas, expressing concerns, and rewarding reporting
- Convey and cultivate a sense that defensive and acquiescent silence as well as acquiescent voice harms the group while prosocial voice benefits everyone
- Provide acknowledgement and appreciation of all safety voice behavior once it is expressed
- Find ways to allow others to see the positive outcomes that result from those who have expressed safety voice

Individual level:

- Provide clear messages about faculty, staff, and students roles to reduce role ambiguity and conflict
- Work to improve faculty, staff, and student perceptions of control over their own safety and the safety of others
- Convey a sense of individual safety responsibility and ownership
- Understand how levels of workload and stress are influencing individuals' safety voice behavior and identify mechanisms for alleviating the burden of engaging in safety voice behavior

- Develop ways to enhance the individual safety-related situational awareness of faculty, staff, and students
- Acknowledge individuals with low tolerance for organizational dissent and convey that safety voice is not a dissenting behavior
- Provide an emphasis on increasing one's error orientation and improvement orientation
- Build high self-efficacy for safety through coaching, peer support, and emphasizing past successes
- Include relevant safety voice criteria in goal-setting and developmental performance discussions
- Check in regularly with faculty, staff, and students to ensure they have sufficient knowledge/awareness of voice expectations

In the midst of the myriad challenges and responsibilities in academia, it is no surprise that safety is often overlooked. There are complex factors at multiple levels at play that can contribute to disillusionment with or even dismissal of safety regulations and procedures. The barriers may sound woefully familiar while the best practices seem foreign and daunting to achieve. However, academic institutions are absolutely capable of implementing strategic changes to make a difference in this arena. Department leaders have a key role. As the types of challenges we address in our laboratories and university facilities increase in their importance, complexity, and innovation, it becomes ever more important to ensure the safety and security of our faculty, staff, and students—those with whom we are entrusting the future of science.

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