

Save Lives: Focus on “Life Critical” Tasks

As Safety Professionals, you have a million things you can work on. Especially if you were recently brought onboard to, “Turn it around” or “Develop a Safety Culture”. This kind of vague direction is what you can typically expect from your hiring manager, and does nothing to help set your priorities. I have written before about how to evaluate a company’s safety program so that you can manage and assess your priorities. The evaluation process should go like this:

- 1) Review the company’s existing Safety Policies & Procedures (SPP).
- 2) Learn and understand what the company does, and what are the risks associated with the work they do.
- 3) Meet your staff and begin to assess their capabilities and challenges.
- 4) Visit the plant or field locations. Observe for yourself firsthand the safety practices and culture in action.
- 5) Talk to, and listen to as many employees as you can. Hopefully from the CEO on down to the janitor.
- 6) Understand the company’s processes, and more importantly the company’s safety culture.

Your evaluation almost always results in overhauling the company’s safety manual. I have yet to be hired into an organization that had great SPPs in place. It’s typically one of the reasons they hired you. Even if the SPPs are in good shape, I have often found they are outdated, inadequate, too focused on regulations, and often some SPPs don’t exist at all.

Revising and updating SPPs to be user friendly, easy to follow and understand, and still comply with regulatory requirements can be a challenge. Many safety professionals, myself included, have gotten caught up in the never-ending process of drafting, revising and getting approval for new or revised SPPs. Large organizations often require several levels of approvals for you to navigate. With up to a hundred separate SPPs, this process can in some cases take years.

The caution here, is that during step one (1) and two (2) above, you need to be focused on identifying the “Life Critical” tasks that your employees participate in. From a risk perspective, Life Critical tasks are those that if not done correctly each and every time, have a higher likelihood of causing death or serious injury. Typical Life Critical Tasks Include:

- Fall Protection
- Confined Space Entry
- Hot Work
- H2S Gas Exposure
- Driving
- Lockout-Tagout
- Arc Flash Protection
- Flammable Materials Handling
- Critical Excavations (Shoring)
- Critical Lifts (Cranes)
- Safety Systems Bypass

You will find there a several foundational SPPs (i.e. Incident Reporting & Investigation) that need to get developed right away. There will also be SPPs that you may need to address because of incidents, or political pressure within the organization. That’s fine, but keep the focus on developing the SPPs that involve Life Critical tasks a high priority. Don’t lose sight of these, and keep pushing them forward. Even in a small organization, you may find there are at least 5 or 6 Life Critical Tasks. Larger, more complex organizations may have 10 or more.

Many companies are now using Serious Incidents & Fatalities (SIF) as a Key Performance Indicator (KPI). That’s great, but by identifying your Life Critical tasks up front, you can better define your SIF events. Your focus and goal should be to get the Life Critical SPPs finalized and implemented in your first year. Too often, Safety

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Professionals get bogged down with the day-to-day issues, and lose focus. Don't lose site of the fact that these Life Critical tasks are the ones in which your employees have a high probably of getting seriously injured or killed. Too often, we lose focus of this fact, and spend too much time on non-value added tasks. We end up spending 90% of our time on reports and board slides; when, you and the organization should be spending 90% of your efforts on ensuring we execute Life Critical tasks perfectly every time.

All Life Critical SPPs need to include a check step in place. This can take the form of a permit, a checklist, or form, but always involves a second persons review and sign-off, or approval to proceed. Life Critical tasks like fall protection should include a buddy system. Always requires two people, and each person inspects the harness and equipment of the other. Once these SPPs are completed, it's all about training. Specific trainings programs need to be developed for each Life Critical Task.

Besides making the development of the Life Critical SPPs a high priority, you also need a way of promoting and advertising the existence of these Life Critical SPPs. Every employee in the company should know what they are. To promote this, I have developed this symbol to be used in identifying and setting these SPPs apart from others. I use this symbol on those Life Critical SPPs and in any communications (Safety Bulletins, Weekly Safety Topics, Newsletters, Lessons Learned, etc.) concerning these Life critical tasks.



Life Critical Symbol

It's easy to get bogged down with PPE requirements, housekeeping hazards, compliance assessments, and safety statistics, which are important and say a lot about your culture, but don't lose site of the real goal, which is "Nobody spends a night in the hospital, and everyone goes home at the end of the day".