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Where do dangers lurk on your plant floor? Uncovering hazards and deficiencies before they become a problem is the first step in reducing risk to people and property.

Awell-executed safety audit program can make a substantial difference in helping companies prevent accidents and injuries. Your company must understand and incorporate key characteristics of a successful audit program. Properly addressing these core areas will help the program deliver maximum impact with minimal risk, while adding value over time.

Key #1: Plan and prepare
To give your audit focus and purpose, identify your goals early by asking these questions:

- What departments or operations will be covered in the inspection?
- What items or activities will be checked?
- How often will inspections be carried out?
- How will the inspections be conducted?
- What follow-up activity will there be so corrections are made?

As with any well-functioning management system, an audit program must have written guidelines and procedures to describe how the audit should be conducted and what corrective action should be taken. These procedures should define all audit activities, including planning the audit, onsite activities and follow-up.

Key #2: Define the scope
Determine whether to conduct a general inspection or targeted inspection. General inspections

are comprehensive reviews of all safety and industrial health exposures in a given area or complete factory. Targeted (or special) inspections deal with specific exposures or hazards in a given unit, section or plant. Good audit programs can include both types of inspections.

Key #3: Involve the right people

The success of an audit relies heavily on involving the right people. Variables in the size and type of business, number and expertise of employees, and special hazards and characteristics of each business will dictate which staff members are assigned to the audit program. In many cases, a team approach is used, mixing facility and line managers, supervisors, engineers, operators and staff from other departments. Safety program managers should critically review the audit team makeup for a balance between objectivity and familiarity.

Key #4: Follow through for corrective action

Identified deficiencies must be assigned to a responsible person and corrected in a reasonable timeframe. In some cases, the deficiency represents a more endemic problem, requiring a more extensive corrective action plan. Followup audits must confirm that the corrective action was satisfactorily completed.

Key #5: Train and educate

Reducing potential risk requires appropriate instruction and training on safety procedures. All employees who may be exposed to the hazards of a machine or process should participate in these training programs, and these programs should be audited. The training agenda and programs must be customized to meet the specific needs of the facility.

Make a lasting impact

Effective safety audits can be an important component of a successful safety program. To realize the full benefits of an audit program, it's critical for a company to have the right focus, involve the right people, allocate adequate resources and follow through on corrective actions. If your company has a well-planned and well-executed audit strategy, you will forge a sustainable competitive advantage.

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