

## Weekly Safety Briefings

Week 14 – Monday, March 30 – Friday, April 3, 2026

### *Authority vs. Ownership in Safety Action Teams*

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#### **Introduction**

Last week gave us the foundation. This week we tackle a subtler and more critical concept: the difference between being told to care about safety and owning it.

#### **Monday – Authority: Who Has the Power to Act?**

Last week we talked about what makes SATs effective. This week we dig into something that quietly undermines many of them: the confusion between authority and ownership.

Let's start with authority. In safety, authority means having the formal power to stop a job, order a repair, allocate budget, or override a decision. Typically, that sits with supervisors, managers, and EHS professionals.

Authority matters. Without it, a team member who identifies a serious hazard has no real path to resolution — they're stuck waiting for someone above them to decide it's worth acting on. Clear lines of authority make fast action possible.

But here's the problem: authority without engagement from the people doing the work creates a safety program that runs from the top down, and top-down programs miss most of what's happening on the floor.

#### **Real-World Example**

At a heavy equipment assembly plant in Indiana, the process for reporting a damaged machine guard had seven steps: the operator had to fill out a paper maintenance request, hand it to their direct supervisor, the supervisor reviewed and signed it, it went to the area manager for secondary approval, then to the maintenance coordinator for scheduling, who entered it into the CMMS system, which generated a work order for the maintenance tech. Under that system, the average time from hazard identification to completed repair was 11 days. Meanwhile, the damaged guard stayed in place and the machine kept running.

One day, an injury occurred because the damaged guard had been removed by the operator because it was interfering with production flow and causing jams. The operator had their hand pulled into the machine and suffered a broken arm. An investigation found that three of the seven steps in getting something fixed added zero value, they existed purely because 'that's how it had always been done.'

The SAT proposed a two-tier system: for non-critical repairs, the existing process stayed. For guard damage, missing safety devices, or lockout-related deficiencies, any SAT member could enter the work order directly into the CMMS system and flag it as a priority safety item, bypassing the supervisory sign-off chain. The supervisor was notified automatically by the system. Average repair time for critical safety items dropped from 11 days to 1 day. In the first month under the new process, three near-miss-level guard deficiencies were caught and repaired before anyone was hurt.

#### **Discussion Prompt**

When you spot a hazard on this floor, who do you tell? How many steps does it take before something gets fixed? Is that the right number of steps? Do critical risks get addressed expeditiously or do we have opportunity to improve our response time?

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#### **Tuesday – Ownership: The Difference Between Compliance and Commitment**

Yesterday we covered authority. Today: ownership and why it's harder to build but more powerful.

Ownership in safety means a team member feels personally responsible for the safety of their area and their coworkers. Not because the rulebook says so. Not because someone is watching. Because they give a damn.

You can spot ownership pretty easily. It's the press operator who stops to re-hang a fallen barrier before their shift starts, even though that's not in their job description. Ownership is proactive. Compliance is reactive. SATs built on ownership outperform SATs built on compliance every time. Compliant members show up to meetings. Owners drive change.

#### **Real-World Example**

At a corrugated box manufacturer in the Pacific Northwest, two operators worked adjacent positions on the same die-cut line - same shift, same equipment, same job description. Both followed the rules. Both wore their PPE. Neither had recordable injuries. But the similarities ended there. The first operator, a 12-year veteran named Sandra, had developed a quiet pre-shift ritual: she'd arrive four minutes early, do a slow walk around her machine, check that the die-cut guard actuators were responding correctly, verify the nip point barriers were seated, and check the floor around the feed table for scrap buildup that could become a slip hazard. She'd been doing this since her second year on the job, after watching a coworker at a previous employer catch his sleeve in an unguarded nip point. She'd never been asked to do it. She just did it because she understood what could go wrong. Over a four-year period, Sandra's station had zero recordable injuries. The adjacent station, operated by a rotation of different workers who performed the job correctly but without that same pre-shift habit, averaged 1.8 recordables per year over the same period - same line, same equipment, same product. When the plant's new EHS coordinator noticed the disparity and asked Sandra about her routine, she shrugged and said: 'I just don't want anyone to get hurt.' The coordinator brought Sandra's pre-shift checklist to the SAT, formalized it into a 3-minute standard pre-shift inspection, and rolled it out across all six die-cut stations. Recordable injuries across the line dropped 60% the following year.

#### **Discussion Prompt**

Think of someone on this team or someone you've worked with who you'd describe as a safety owner. What did they do differently? What did it look like?

#### **Wednesday – When Authority and Ownership Collide**

We know what authority looks like. We know what ownership looks like. Now let's talk about what happens when they conflict, because they do. The most common scenario: a team member with strong safety ownership identifies a real hazard and wants to act. But the formal authority a supervisor, a manager doesn't see the urgency or is focused on production. The owner pushes. The authority resists. The hazard stays.

This is one of the fastest ways to kill safety ownership. When people who care deeply get blocked by people who hold the authority, they stop raising issues. The fix? Authority figures in a SAT need to actively protect and amplify ownership behaviors. When an operator raises a concern, the right response isn't 'I'll look into it.' It's 'What do you think we should do about it?'

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#### **Real-World Example**

At a chemical blending facility in Texas, a batch operator named Rodrigo had been raising the same concern at SAT meetings for over two months: a 3-inch drain valve at the base of Mixing Tank 4 had no secondary containment beneath it. The line carried a corrosive acidic solution. If the valve failed or was opened accidentally, there was nothing to catch the spill, it would run directly across the concrete floor toward a floor drain that connected to the municipal sewer, creating both a chemical exposure risk for workers and a potential environmental violation. Rodrigo had brought it up at the first SAT meeting. The supervisor, who had 20 years at the facility, said it had always been that way and hadn't been a problem. Rodrigo brought it up again at the second meeting. Same response. He came to the third meeting with a folder: photos of the valve and the uncontained floor area, a printout of the facility's Tier II chemical inventory showing the volume and hazard classification of the material in that tank, a quote from a local vendor for a polyethylene drip containment pan sized for the valve footprint (\$180) and a one-page summary of a similar incident at a chemical plant in Louisiana in 2019 where a failed drain valve caused a reportable release and a \$47,000 OSHA citation. He put the folder on the table and said quietly: 'I'm not trying to cause trouble. I just don't want this to become our problem.' The supervisor approved the purchase order before the meeting ended. The drip pan was installed four days later. Rodrigo was asked to become the Chair of the SAT and lead the team.

#### **Discussion Prompt**

Has anyone ever felt like a safety concern you raised just got absorbed and nothing changed? What would have helped that situation move forward?

#### **Thursday – Delegating Authority Without Losing Accountability**

Strong SATs push decision-making authority closer to the work. But that delegation has to be deliberate.

Good delegation looks like this: here is the scope of what you're authorized to act on, here's what needs to be escalated, and here's how we stay accountable together. It's a trust contract.

For example, a SAT might give frontline members the authority to immediately remove equipment from service if they identify a critical guard failure, no manager approval required. But they're also expected to log it, tag it, and notify maintenance to get it repaired.

Authority and accountability move together. People own things more deeply when they have genuine agency over them.

#### **Real-World Example**

A tier-one automotive supplier in Michigan that produced door assemblies decided to give their SAT real authority, not just the ability to flag concerns and hope management acted, but the power to select their own improvement projects without needing a manager to approve the topic list. Leadership was nervous at first. The operations director said plainly in the planning meeting: 'I'm worried they'll spend all their time on break room improvements and parking lot complaints instead of real safety work.' He was wrong. In their first quarter, the SAT, made up entirely of hourly assemblers, a material handler, and two line techs chose three projects: eliminating a pinch point on the door hem roller that had caused four first-aid hand injuries in 18 months, redesigning the ergonomic layout of the door seal subassembly station where two operators had reported wrist strain, and addressing inadequate lighting inside the body-side aperture fixtures where workers were drilling in near-darkness and generating chips near their faces. Every one of those projects came directly from the work.

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Nobody in management had prioritized any of them. By the end of the year, the operations director who had worried about parking lot complaints stood up at the plant's annual safety review and said: 'I was wrong about what our people would do with this authority. They went straight after the things that were actually causing injuries. I should have trusted them sooner.'

#### **Discussion Prompt**

If you had the authority to immediately stop one unsafe condition on this floor right now, with no approval needed - what would it be, and what would you do?

#### **Friday – Building a Team That Owns Safety — Not Just Follows It**

Let's close this week with the big picture. Authority is structural. It can be given, delegated, expanded, or restricted. Ownership is cultural, it's built through trust, repetition, and evidence that it matters.

As supervisors, our job isn't just to hold authority. It's to use our authority to build ownership in others. Every time we ask an operator for their input on a hazard fix instead of just deciding ourselves, we build ownership. Every time we publicly credit a team member for catching something, we build ownership.

Next week, we move from culture to process: how to make SAT meetings something that generates real action instead of just conversation.

#### **Real-World Example**

A wire harness manufacturer in Alabama launched a SAT with one unconventional rule baked into the charter from day one: the chair of the SAT would be someone from the frontline, or a manager or supervisor, and the team would be composed of other hourly team members. Only one leader would remain on the team as a co-chair. The plant manager was candid about his reservations. 'What if they don't get anything accomplished?' he asked. The EHS director's answer: 'What if they pick things that matter more than what we would have chosen? What if we create a support team of leaders that help remove roadblocks from the SAT and the support team and SAT team meet together once a month?'

The first SAT/Support Team meeting told the story. The SAT members told the support team that Line 4 had operators making upward of 4,000 repetitive wrist rotations per shift and two workers had already filed ergonomic complaints that had quietly disappeared into the system. Management had never prioritized it because production numbers on Line 4 were strong. The SAT proposed a redesign of the fixture orientation, recommended a spring-loaded retainer, and stated they believed they could cut the rotation count by 60%. The Support Team was impressed that the SAT came with facts and data and a great plan of action. Throughout the improvement project, the SAT gave the Support Team report outs on status and the Support Team jumped in to help, coach, teach, and provide the needed resources to keep the project moving forward. By the end of the year, first-aid incidents were down 48% and the plant manager had stopped worrying what the SAT was going to work on next. 'I want more SATs in the plant,' he said at a regional safety roundtable. 'They always find the right things. They live there.'

#### **Discussion Prompt**

Weekly Wrap-Up: What's the difference between someone who complies with safety and someone who owns it? What does that look like on this floor, day to day?