

NEW SAFETY RULES: WHEN? WHO? HOW?

So, when should one create a new safety rule? Usually, I instruct companies to resist the temptation to create new policies - safety-related or otherwise - if possible. There are far too many companies with onerous and outdated policy books. You don't make policies for rare incidents that involve limited numbers of people, or a remote chance of harm or lowered productivity. However, if physical harm is a real possibility you obviously need to follow all applicable laws and industry norms, and potentially institute even more proactive company policies. The cost of administering one good policy always outweighs the costs of one big lawsuit. Besides, keeping your people safe is the right thing to do. To whom should the rule apply? Granted, while this can be difficult to determine, one rule of thumb is when in doubt, a rule applies to everyone. Stated differently - you usually have three camps of people when there is a new safety rule to consider: those to whom it clearly applies, those to whom it might apply, and those to whom it clearly bears no significance. Err by addressing everyone in the first two groups. Consider, for example, a rule requiring the use of goggles on the shop floor. Should line workers wear them? Of course. What about the individual who sits at the desk, in the far corner of the shop, far away from the action? If that person physically interacts at all with the dangerous areas of the shop - you bet. Such a person is similar to **the engineer** who only occasionally makes a trip to the floor - he or she needs to be protected, too. Another huge reason to err on the side of the "when in doubt, it applies to them" approach is that the more people a policy applies to, the more just and fair it will seem to all. How should the rule be enforced? You only have two legitimate options: informal sanctions and formal sanctions. Formal sanctions include verbal reprimands and written reprimands that can be added to an employee's official file. Unless the violation is malicious and repetitive (and thus clearly detrimental to morale and productivity), start with private reprimands. If needed, move to public reprimands, and if further action is necessary, make a formal objection with written comments for the individual's permanent file. Throughout the process, be sure to remain positive, clearly note the specific breach of policy, and identify the widespread compliance with the policy by yourself and others directly involved. However, written sanctions for safety rule violations are typically needed only when the risk of harm is particularly high. Many situations pose minor as opposed to major risks, and in the latter case, using informal sanctions is typically the better bet. Start by using existing, regularly scheduled group meetings (such as a production meeting) to bring up the issue - without naming names as to who is, and is not, adhering to the established standard. Use these forums as a place to talk about, agree upon, and write down particular safety norms as supported by the group. Publicly post them for all to see, preferably in common areas. Importantly, the group must agree on the consequences of violating established protocol - this might include something as simple as having to put a dollar in the Donut Fund for the next weekly meeting. In the extreme, groups may impose harsher sanctions, including ostracizing a nonconforming member. Though not universally effective, group-imposed protocol can often be far more powerful than formal rules and policies. Seriously consider the three previously addressed questions: when do you make a new safety rule, to whom should the rule apply, and how should it be enforced? Next, ensure that you work with the proper supervisors and employees to get feedback on the specific nature of the proposed rule. When an employee is given a genuine voice in crafting policies that will personally affect him or her, you drastically increase the likelihood of compliance once these rules are put into practice.

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