

Executive Ergonomics

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Executives are people first. Sounds obvious, but this is key to heightening active support for Safety and Health from your company's apex. While they may not have much exposure to lockout/tagout issues nor to hazardous workplace materials, senior managers are as prone to soft-tissue injuries (and slips/trips/falls) as line workers. Remember that 80 percent of all people in many countries experience back pain incidents. So senior managers can personally relate to these issues and be motivated toward adopting ergonomic actions as much as employees doing more physical work.

In our worldwide experience implementing strain/sprain, slip/trip/fall, and hand injury prevention systems, we've had the opportunity to work with numerous senior managers. We've found that, when approached right, executives can become highly energized by personal applications of ergonomics (which I define as "improving the fit between people and their tasks").

For example, after being scheduled to present to more than a hundred senior managers at a large transportation manufacturing company, I heard from the HSE Director that the "Plant Manager" (with more than 25,000 workers) wasn't planning on attending. I asked to briefly meet with him before my presentation. When he shook my hand, he simultaneously looked at his watch. Message received. Luckily, I noticed there was a golf club in the corner of his office and offered that, as he played golf, would he be interested in seeing an ergonomics technique that many reported added 15 or more yards to their drive, without changing anything else? He warily assented with narrowed eyes. In under five minutes, I demonstrated how slight changes in his grip could make immediate significant improvements in his balance and available strength. That this same principle could be easily applied to reducing carpal tunnel problems and soft-tissue injuries to arms, back, and shoulders — big concerns in their riveting and assembly areas. His eyes widened,

and he immediately told his administrative assistant to call all his direct reports to make sure they attended my afternoon seminar. This made it a lot easier to implement an ergonomics system.

While he had previously been "committed" to Safety, he was really excited about improving his golf game. The moral is clear: Motivate people by what's really important to them, not what you think ought to be. Enroll executives by focusing on their personal concerns and interests, as well as their Safety "charge."

In another instance, I was asked to meet with the president of a worldwide oil services company. Like many in their industry, this organization had numerous slips, trips, and falls. Despite significant losses from direct payouts as well as replacement costs that placed critical company contracts at performance risk, little had been done to turn this around. That is, until the president's 90-year-old mother fell on black ice (you can't see it, but it's there). This, along with his newfound awareness of the level of damage slips and falls had on employees, forged a wakeup call to protect his mother — and his workers — from future injuries. The hardest part now over, we then discussed workable methods and a system he could apply to all his sites, learning these for himself and family first.

Anyone with arms, legs, torso, and head is at risk for strains, sprains, and slips/trips/falls. Executives, too, can relate to and use practical ergonomic techniques and decision-making in their own lives. Think of offering select proven ergonomic interventions to managers they can personally pilot for their organization. If they see and feel positive improvements for themselves that are easily applied, it's much more likely they'll support, and even drive, ergonomics in their areas of responsibility. Discuss how they can share these methods with their family — and workers. Give them a fish, teach them to fish, then help them teach others how to fish.

Furthermore, infusing ergonomic concepts and skills at the top level encourages senior managers to share any personal success story throughout the company. This can be a powerful way to break the inertia of executives merely verbally supporting safety from a distance. Motivate executive ergonomics by focusing on their favorite off-work activities (golf, fishing, hunting, gardening, home projects, etc.). Also, show how they might use ergonomic decision-making in purchasing cars and other personal items. Show them how they can simultaneously elevate their attention and reduce tension when sitting at their desks and while traveling (entering/exiting moving airport walkways, standing in line, carrying bags, pulling rolling luggage). Discuss how they might boost charisma during presentations, even how they can apply ergonomic positioning methods to strengthen their handshake.

Think of Executives as more than just an obstacle to ergonomics and Safety, or as merely a means to approving funding. Strategize how to best serve their individual needs and concerns through personalized ergonomic methods and techniques. I've seen this work with Executives many times — and it may help your company, as well.

About the Author

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