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Contact details:

Pat: 082 442 8521 (08h00 – 16h30)

Email: p.wessels@topcompliance.co.za

Website: <https://www.topcompliance.co.za>

When safety goes right

Building a workplace where good habits are noticed before incidents force attention.

Occupational health and safety is often discussed only when something has gone wrong. A person is injured, a near miss is reported, an inspector arrives, a complaint is raised, or a client asks for evidence. The conversation then becomes urgent, uncomfortable and reactive. Yet the strongest OHS systems are not built only around what went wrong. They are built around what goes right every day, and whether those positive actions are seen, supported and repeated.

A positive OHS culture does not mean pretending that hazards do not exist. It means creating a workplace where people are confident enough to report hazards early, supervisors are willing to correct unsafe conditions before there is pressure, management listens when concerns are raised, and employees understand that safety is part of doing the job properly. It is practical, visible and disciplined. It is also far more encouraging than a system that only responds after injury, damage or conflict.

Every workplace already has examples of safety going right. A cleaner places warning signs before mopping a busy passage. A security officer stops an unknown contractor and confirms authorisation. A supervisor removes a damaged ladder from use. A first aider checks the first aid box before the monthly checklist is due. A machine operator reports a strange noise before the equipment fails. A teacher postpones outdoor activity when lightning risk increases. A driver refuses to overload a vehicle. These moments may look ordinary, but they are exactly where prevention happens.

The challenge is that good safety behaviour is often quiet. Incidents are visible because they disrupt the workplace. Prevention is less dramatic because nothing happens. No ambulance is called. No production is stopped. No parent, client or employee complains. No reportable incident is triggered. This can cause management to underestimate the value of everyday safe decisions. In reality, each of these small actions is evidence that the OHS system is alive.

The legal duty is practical, not negative

The Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 places a proactive duty on employers. Section 8(1) requires every employer to provide and maintain, as far as reasonably practicable, a working environment that is safe and without risk to the health of employees. Section 8(2) expands this duty by requiring safe systems of work, the identification of hazards, steps to eliminate or mitigate hazards, proper arrangements for articles and substances, information, instruction, training and supervision.

This legal duty should not be viewed only as a burden. It is also a structure for building a better workplace. When hazards are identified early, work is planned better. When employees are trained properly, mistakes reduce. When supervision is visible, standards improve. When maintenance is done before failure, operations become more reliable. When communication is clear, people feel more secure and less uncertain. Good OHS management protects people, but it also protects time, trust and continuity.

Section 13 of the OHSA requires employees to be informed of the hazards attached to their work, the precautionary measures to be taken, and the procedures to be followed. This is a positive communication duty. Employees cannot support a safe workplace if they do not understand the risks, the controls, and the reasons behind them. A toolbox talk, induction, refresher session or committee discussion should therefore do more than tick a training box. It should help people make better decisions during real work.

Employees also have duties in terms of Section 14. They must take reasonable care for their own health and safety and that of other persons, cooperate with the employer, obey health and safety rules and procedures, and report unsafe or unhealthy situations. A positive OHS culture makes this easier. People are far more likely to report problems when they believe the report will be taken seriously and will not simply be blamed back onto them.

Positive safety is not soft safety

Positive OHS does not mean ignoring discipline, accepting poor standards or replacing legal compliance with motivational slogans. A positive safety culture still requires clear rules, competent supervision, proper maintenance, consequences for deliberate non-compliance, and management follow-through. The difference is that the system encourages prevention before punishment becomes necessary.

A workplace can be firm and constructive at the same time. For example, if employees repeatedly leave materials in a walkway, management should correct the behaviour. However, the response should also ask why it is happening. Is there enough storage space? Is the delivery area poorly planned? Are employees rushing because of production pressure? Is the walkway the only convenient route? Did supervision allow the practice to become normal? Positive OHS looks for the behaviour and the system behind the behaviour.

This approach strengthens accountability because it makes expectations clearer. Employees know what must be reported. Supervisors know what must be corrected. Management knows what must be resourced. Safety representatives know what must be raised at committee level. Contractors know what is expected before they start work. The result is a workplace where people are less likely to hide problems and more likely to solve them.

What should management start noticing?

Management should intentionally look for leading indicators. These are signs that the workplace is controlling risk before harm occurs. They are often more useful than waiting for injury statistics, because injury statistics only confirm that the control failed after the fact.

- Hazards reported before anyone is injured.
- Near misses reported honestly and investigated constructively.
- Defects corrected and closed out instead of copied from checklist to checklist.
- Employees stopping unsafe work and asking for assistance.
- Supervisors coaching employees on safe procedures during normal work.
- Safety representatives completing meaningful inspections and raising practical recommendations.
- First aid boxes, fire equipment, emergency routes and assembly points being checked.
- Contractors being properly inducted, risk assessed and supervised.
- Training being linked to the actual work, not only to generic attendance registers.
- Committee minutes showing decisions, responsible persons, target dates and close-out evidence.

When these actions are visible, management can see that the system is working before an incident tests it. This is also stronger compliance evidence. It shows implementation, not merely paperwork.

A simple example: the reported loose handrail

A staff member notices that a handrail on a staircase is loose. In a weak safety culture, the person may ignore it, assume that someone else knows, or complain informally without reporting it. The handrail remains loose until someone falls or until an auditor records it as a finding.

In a positive safety culture, the staff member reports it immediately. The supervisor checks the area, places a temporary control if needed, reports the maintenance request, and ensures that the defect is repaired. The checklist is updated, the corrective action is closed out, and the health and safety committee can see that the matter was handled. Nobody is injured, and the evidence trail shows active control.

This is the kind of safety success that deserves attention. It may not feel exciting because there was no incident, but that is exactly the point. The best outcome is often the one that never becomes a crisis.

The role of health and safety representatives and committees

Sections 17 and 18 of the OHSA deal with health and safety representatives and their functions. Representatives can review the effectiveness of health and safety measures, identify potential hazards, examine causes of incidents, investigate complaints, make representations to the employer, and participate in inspections and consultations. These functions are not negative functions. They are practical opportunities to improve the workplace.

Sections 19 and 20 deal with health and safety committees. A committee should not only be a meeting where old problems are repeated. It should be a place where progress is visible. A strong committee agenda should include hazards reported, corrective actions completed, incident and near miss trends, training needs, first aid and emergency readiness, contractor issues, housekeeping concerns, maintenance matters and management decisions.

When committees record positive close-out, they build confidence. Employees see that reporting leads to action. Representatives see that their work matters. Management receives better information. The OHS system becomes more credible because it produces results, not only minutes.

Making good safety behaviour normal

Positive safety becomes normal when it is included in everyday management routines. It should not depend on a special campaign once a year. It should be visible in induction, toolbox talks, supervision, procurement, maintenance, contractor control, inspections, incident investigations, emergency drills and management meetings.

A practical method is to ask three short questions during inspections and committee meetings: What is working well? What is starting to worry us? What must be closed out before it becomes an incident? These questions keep the discussion balanced. They allow the workplace to recognise progress while still dealing honestly with risk.

Another useful practice is to thank employees for reporting hazards and near misses. This does not require expensive incentives. A simple acknowledgement from a supervisor can change behaviour. When people are treated respectfully for raising concerns, they are more likely to speak up early. Early reporting is one of the cheapest and most effective controls available to any employer.

Positive OHS still requires evidence

A positive culture must still be documented properly. Good intentions are not enough if the employer cannot prove implementation. Evidence should show what was identified, what was decided, who was responsible, when action was due, what was done, and whether the action was effective.

Examples of positive compliance evidence include a hazard report that led to a repair, a near miss investigation that changed a procedure, a committee recommendation that was closed out, training records linked to actual workplace risks, a maintenance register showing defects repaired, a drill report showing lessons learned, and a contractor induction that includes site-specific risks and emergency procedures.

This evidence does not need to show that the workplace is perfect. It must show that the employer is actively managing risk as far as reasonably practicable. Honest evidence of improvement is often stronger than a polished file that hides unresolved hazards.

Practical actions for the next month

To strengthen positive OHS in a simple and practical way, management can start with the following actions:

- Ask each department to report one hazard that was corrected before an incident occurred.
- Review the last three inspection checklists and confirm whether repeated defects were actually closed out.
- Ask employees whether they know how to report a hazard, near miss, injury, emergency or security concern.
- Discuss one positive safety action at the next health and safety committee meeting.
- Check that first aiders, emergency team members and safety representatives are still available, trained and known to employees.
- Recognise one employee, supervisor or team for a practical safety action that prevented risk.
- Update the HIRA or safe working procedure where a reported concern shows that the current control is not enough.

Why this matters

A workplace with a positive OHS culture is not a workplace without risk. It is a workplace where risk is more likely to be seen, reported, discussed and controlled. It is a workplace where employees do not wait for injury before speaking up. It is a workplace where management treats prevention as part of operational excellence, not as an interruption.

This is also good leadership. Employees notice when management only reacts after something goes wrong. They also notice when management listens early, fixes problems, and supports the people who help prevent harm. Trust grows when people can see that safety reports lead to action.

The professional message is simple: do not wait for an incident to prove that safety matters. Notice the good decisions that prevent incidents. Support them. Record them. Repeat them. That is where a strong OHS system quietly earns its value.

A safe workplace is not built only by investigating what went wrong. It is built by noticing, supporting and repeating what goes right.

For more information, please contact us on info@topcompliance.co.za

Yours in Health and Safety



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Appointments, checklists and templates	First aid equipment	Signage	Legal posters	Safety Equipment

Courses offered by Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	Online	Onsite Excluding travel
Safety representative – Legal Liability	R980.00	R1300.00
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	R1250.00	R 1730.00
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	R735.00	R875.00
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	R735.00	R875.00
Basic Ladder Safety Course	R735.00	R875.00
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	R735.00	R875.00
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	R810.00	R950.00
First aid		
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures – THEORY MODULE	R400.00	-

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/	
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	
Safety representative – Legal Liability	
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	
Basic Ladder Safety Course	
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses	
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	

ONSITE TRAINING	
First Aid Courses:	
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures	2 days
Level 2 - US 120496 - Provide risk-based primary emergency care/first aid in the workplace	3 days
Level 3 - US 376480 - Provide first aid as an advanced first responder	3 days

Level 1 & 2 - US 119567 & 120496	3 days
Level 1, 2 & 3 - US 119567, 120496 & 376480	5 days
Level 2 & 3 - US 120496 & 376480	3 days
Child and infant CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking and AED	1 day
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	
Safety representative – Legal Liability	1 day
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	1 day
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	1 day
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	6 hours
Basic Ladder Safety	6 hours
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses	
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	6 hours
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	1 day