

In the past few decades, safety management systems (SMS) have become prevalent in the marine industry. Most vessel operators conducting international voyages are required by law to implement a safety management system that complies with the International Safety Management (ISM) Code. Other operators have voluntarily chosen to implement an SMS as a means of formalizing their approach to risk and safety and to continuously improve their operations. Implementing a system is a significant undertaking by any company, and each wants to ensure that implementation is successful.

The USCG defines an SMS as *“a structured and documented set of procedures enabling company and vessel personnel to effectively implement safety and environmental protection policies that are specific to that company or vessel.”*

So, what are some straightforward steps that can be taken to help promote effective SMS implementation?

### **1. Understand your company**

A binder of procedures and policies becomes static unless it is given life by a company's shared commitment and consistently put into practice.

To achieve this, there needs to be an understanding of the company on a personal level – including its shared beliefs and individual concerns as voiced by employees.

Leadership and management should take time in the early phases of considering an SMS to gain the perspective of its employees from the deck plate to the highest levels both onboard and ashore. Valuable



insights may be gained by asking simple questions to identify cultural attitudes and beliefs towards working within an SMS. Supplement questions with education to help employees understand what an SMS is and why it's important that the organization have one. Employee feedback should be respected to develop and improve the system with company end-users in mind. It will become easier to understand the real and potential challenges to implementing change by posing the right questions –

- Is there a prevailing safety culture already in place at my company?
- What is our company's attitude towards safety?
- In matters of safety and pollution prevention, does my opinion matter?
- Do we have a proactive safety culture or is it a more reactive one?

### **2. Design for the end-user**

A sure way to stunt SMS implementation is to create a system that is cumbersome and does not accurately reflect the employee's daily working experience.

Out-of-the-box systems that are made to fit the organization are going to be met with employee resistance because it will appear that their needs and concerns do not matter to the people making decisions. Always keep your end-users in mind by incorporating their priorities and perspectives into the SMS.

### 3. Find champions

Find individuals within the organization who will champion the system and tout its merits. Real-life examples coming from respected employees about how the system has made their jobs easier and safer will go a long way towards acceptance within the organization.

Any management system will fail if not supported by the right people who are in a position to make a difference and positively influence behaviors.

### 4. Seek Feedback

No system is final once written. It is designed to evolve and continuously improve over time.

Take time to periodically ask employees for feedback and then



earnestly work to incorporate that feedback and show them the results. Safety management systems are collaborative partnerships between employees at every level within an organization. Collaboration involves frequent and productive exchanges that help lead to improvement over time. Find ways to foster collaborative opportunities within the SMS as an investment to make meaningful improvements over the long term.

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