



SAFETY LEADERSHIP

The Differentiators of Safety Excellence

The goal of excellent safety efforts is not to control workers, but to add value to them.

Terry L. Mathis | Jul 19, 2019

I recently made a number of phone calls to organizational leaders inviting them to speak at our upcoming safety excellence conference. As we discussed their recent successes and challenges, it became evident these world-class safety organizations had several things separating them from average and poor performers. I started jotting notes to myself and contrasting their details with what I often hear from new

clients and prospects. While several issues surfaced occasionally, there were six that were universal among these leaders.

The average prospect I speak with has a goal to improve their safety numbers over last year. They set a numeric goal to strive for that can be considered an improvement. Since they basically measure their failures, they are striving to fail less. Without a clear vision of what success looks like, it is virtually impossible to work toward it. World-class safety organizations have a vision of success they are working toward, not a vision of failure they are working away from. When I point out this distinction, the ones excellent in safety get it and the others don't. They often say, "Success and the lack of failure are the same thing!" They think of it like a golf score. The goal is to drive the numbers as low as possible.

In excellent organizations, the majority of improvement efforts happen pre-accident. Safety is defined as positive things to do rather than outcomes to avoid. Goals are 100% safe, not 0% accidents. In others, most improvements are made post-accident as a result of accident investigation and analysis. Proactive efforts put organizations ahead of the accident curve. Others have to wait until the accident happens to learn the lesson and try to avoid repetition. At one new client site, my contact had identified a significant risk and was discussing it with the workers from that department. One worker asked, "Who wants to volunteer to get hurt on that so we can get it fixed?"

Much of these first two differentiators have to do with the metrics organizations use to direct safety efforts. Many organizations with less than excellent safety performance are driven strictly by lagging indicators. They tend to distrust metrics that are not totally discrete, or they have simply gotten into the habit of using accidents and near misses (yes, near misses are lagging indicators; they have already happened and cannot be prevented) to make all or most improvements. They call these improvements "corrective actions" or similar terms and use them to prevent the same accident from happening again.

Excellent organizations have discovered there are three levels of leading indicators that impact each other before impacting lagging indicators and have developed, or are in the process of developing, a balanced scorecard for safety. These organizations know more accurately what it takes to make safety improvements and can measure the impact of improvement efforts long before they result in accidental injury.

There is a serious difference in mindset between excellent safety performers and others. Many view workers as the problem, or at least the variable, to be controlled. I have heard countless safety professionals and organizational leaders say things like, “If we just get people to quit doing stupid things, maybe we could prevent these remaining accidents.” They often have real concern and are genuinely trying to improve, but their mindset limits their potential. In excellent organizations I hear, “We are better understanding why workers would make these decisions and what is influencing them.”

The goal of excellent safety efforts is not to control workers, but to add value to them. The worker is the customer of safety efforts. That customer’s voice should be heard, and their needs should be met or exceeded. I talked to a CEO about marketing his safety program to workers and he challenged me saying that no one needs to be sold on safety. I pointed out that it was not the general idea of safety he needed to market, but his specific approach to safety. People need to know the rationale behind safety efforts and buy in to the concept that following them will actually make them safer. Every time a safety rule or procedure is made that does not make sense to workers, safety is damaged.

Excellent organizations make sure that rules and procedures are logical and add true value, not just knee-jerk reactions. For example, a paving crew member was caught going beneath an underpass without a hardhat. The organization made a rule that every worker must wear a hardhat at all times on the job even when there was no overhead danger. The rule resulted in several heat strokes and skepticism about other safety rules as well as this one.

One generalization that not only separates excellent safety performers from lesser ones, but separates effective organizations from less effective ones in almost every aspect of performance, is not doing too much at once. The old adage about eating an elephant one bite at a time applies. Idealists want to fix what is wrong and practical people do also. The difference is that practical people do it in paced steps rather than all at once.

Organizations that try to improve safety often struggle, while those that target specific improvements, make them, and move on to others, truly achieve that illusive thing we call “continuous improvement.” Today’s workers are often overloaded and frustrated. Breaking improvement down into doable steps minimizes the perception of the magnitude of change and reduces stress.

I try to prioritize my articles and presentations by what I hear my clients are concerned about. The most excellent want to move to even greater excellence and others want to make those first steps toward it. These concepts are key to the success of both groups.

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