



# Excellence does not equal perfection

What is your goal: safety excellence or safety perfection? The terms are not interchangeable. Striving for the former does not indicate accepting anything less than the latter. In conferences and social media groups where opinions are freely expressed, there appears to be significant dismay and confusion with the terms used to describe striving for greatness in safety.

Three common sources were leveraged to quickly highlight the differences in these two misunderstood terms: Google, Wikipedia and Dictionary.com.

- Excellence — Google defines this as “the quality of being outstanding or extremely good.” On Wikipedia you will find “a talent or quality which is unusually good and so surpasses ordinary standards.” Finally, Dictionary.com assigns the definition as “the fact or state of excelling; superiority; eminence.” Excellence is not about perfection; rather, it’s about creating a state whereby you surpass ordinary standards to excel and become extremely good.

- Perfection — A Google search for this term yields, “the condition, state or

quality of being free or as free as possible from all flaws or defects.” The collective on Wikipedia believe perfection is “a state of completeness and flawlessness,” while the employees at Dictionary.com entered the definition as “the state or quality of being or becoming perfect.” Perfection means you are free from all flaws.

It is impossible to engineer out all risks from any operating environment. Does that stop us from trying or inventing new approaches to do so? No. Humans are fallible. Dr. James Reason, an expert on the psychology of human error, points out, “The same situations cause different errors in different people.” Knowing humans are prone to make mistakes does not stop us from attempting to address and overcome the influences on behavior. The journey to excellence in safety is more about continuous improvement than accepting anything less than perfection.

Coach Vince Lombardi proposes, “Perfection is not attainable, but if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence.” It is hard to argue with that logic, yet some people do when it comes to common safety

perfection goals like zero injuries or zero risks. And they have a good point. When goals are perceived as impossible, it is difficult to engage collective bodies and minds to achieve them. Does this mean companies should set goals other than zero? No, but zero recordables, injuries or incidents shouldn’t be your only goal. Companies regularly achieve zero injuries every day. If that is the only goal, then there are many days in most companies the goal is met. But that doesn’t explain how the goal was achieved so it can be repeated, nor does it illustrate how to get better.

American Society for Quality writes, “Organizational excellence is not absolute but incremental. Different tiers or ‘maturity levels’ should be identified as interim targets for each of the organizational excellence characteristics. By focusing on the performance expectations of an accessible maturity level instead of an unreachable ideal, employees and stakeholders will be more inclined to make the necessary modifications within their control and capabilities. As maturity levels are reached, participants within

the organization should be recognized for their constructive success.”

More simply, there are three elements to excellence in safety: 1. The ability to achieve and recognize great results. 2. An understanding of precisely how the results were achieved. 3. A shared mindset throughout the organization that further improvement will always be possible. Perfection is striving for flawlessness and more about results. Excellence is measured best not by status but by progress toward it. Where are you on the journey to safety excellence, and how do you know?

*Shawn M. Galloway is the president of ProAct Safety and co-author of several bestselling books. As a consultant, adviser and keynote speaker, he has helped hundreds of organizations within every major industry internationally achieve and sustain excellence in performance and culture. He is also the host of the highly acclaimed weekly podcast series Safety Culture Excellence®.*

**For more information, call (936) 273-8700 or email [info@ProActSafety.com](mailto:info@ProActSafety.com).**

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