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Failing Less is Not a Safety Strategy

If your safety program is based on lowering injury rates, it's time to think differently.

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By

Since the inception of OSHA in the early 1970s we have measured safety by our failure rate. Like a golf score, we want it to be as low as possible and want it to be getting lower with each passing year. However noble a goal this might be, it is *not* a safety strategy. Yet, when I ask executives what their strategy is, the second most common response is to quote a targeted rate or reduction of rate (second only to mentioning a new program to be implemented).

Lowering a recordable rate is not a strategy, and a new program should only be part of a strategy. If you were launching a new product line or going for an increase in market share, you would develop a strategy to address the key issues impacting the desired results. Your strategy would address leadership, key skills needed, involving the right people, motivating those people, and measuring the right things to monitor success. So, rather than targeting the safety failure rate, how about targeting some issues that could impact the rate?

Below, I identify some of the targets that might help toward the development of a true improvement-based safety strategy.

1. Safety Leadership Skills – When the leaders lead, the followers follow. Do your organizational leaders lead safety like they lead other business activities and priorities? Do they establish the priority or value of safety to the organization and reinforce that through constant communication? Do they know how to lead safety or do they need help? Are the key leaders aligned on their approach to safety, and does the workforce get a unified message regardless of the messenger delivering it? Addressing and improving any of these aspects of leadership (and many more) could be a part of a good safety strategy and could make a significant impact on the organization's safety performance.

2. Performance Coaching – Has your organization discovered yet that safety is something your employees do, and that you can't do it for them or stand over them constantly and make them do it? Your managers and supervisors are coaches, not players. Their primary tool for improvement is to

help others improve. We call this "coaching." Unfortunately, even though coaching is one of the most important skills for leaders, few leaders have had any formal training for coaching. A little formal training can go a long way toward safety improvement. But training is only a beginning and not a complete strategy. The training needs follow-up, and the use of the new skills needs to be reinforced and evaluated over time to ensure that it becomes a permanent part of the culture. It needs to find its way into job descriptions or RREs (Roles, Responsibilities and Expectations) for key leaders and supervisors. It needs to become a part of employee evaluations and new-employee orientation.

3. Employee Involvement Opportunities – The more active employees are in safety efforts, the better they work. This, of course, depends on the quality of involvement not just the time spent. Many organizations want more involvement, but fail to provide the structure for it to happen. What can employees join, do, volunteer for, or get involved in? There is no magic answer. For some organizations it is OSHA's Voluntary Protection Program, for some it is formal safety programs, and for others it is audit teams or safety blitzes. Whatever structure you choose, make sure it can succeed. Ensure that results of the activities are highly visible, and that participation is rewarded and not inadvertently or informally punished. Even a frown from the boss when you return from participating in a safety activity can doom the participation.

4. Improved Safety Communications – Is your safety communication delivered via multi-media? Do you measure the reception of the information or just the sending? Does your safety communication create focus and improvement or just cause information overload? My colleague Shawn Galloway developed a metric for several organizations he calls ROA (return on attention). When you ask for people's attention and send them a message, what do you get in return? How "sticky" are your messages? Are they memorable or do they get forgotten quickly? Improving safety communication can be a very worthwhile part of an overall safety strategy. You don't have to do everything at once. Many organizations address one or two aspects of safety communication per year and target specific improvements.

5. Revised Safety Motivational Program – Many safety incentive plans are not just ineffective; they are dangerous. With the wealth of new information available on what truly motivates workers, it is definitely time to review your strategy for safety motivation, or consider implementing one if you don't already have one. Review the new literature (including the free white papers available online) and take advantage of the new approaches available. Warning: Be careful not to make your change de-motivating by taking away rewards or incentives.   Suddenly stopping the old program, even to start a new one, can create the illusion of a take-away. Rather, transition your existing program to a more effective one using the same budget.

6. Improved Safety Metrics – If you want to improve the lagging indicators (and you certainly do), discover the leading indicators that predict the improvements. If you choose to pursue one of these six suggestions, measure your progress toward the goal and see if the goal actually impacts the safety performance. This goal can help with goals #4 and #5 as well. Communicate the new metrics as a part of your overall safety communication improvement strategy and you will find that "visible improvement" is one of the new tools for motivation. Setting and achieving goals can help build a "can do" safety culture. What better quality for a culture than the ability to target and accomplish improvement?

All safety strategies begin with thinking differently. All safety improvement comes from doing things differently. The most effective strategies target the most transformational issues, i.e. the issues that can make the biggest differences in safety performance. Look at these suggested targets and honestly rate your organization's performance in these areas. Where are the weaknesses and where are the opportunities to improve performance the most? This is strategic thinking. Use it to

create an improvement-based strategy that will enhance your safety performance. When you succeed more, by default, you fail less!

Terry L. Mathis is the founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, and was recently named one of 'The 50 People Who Most Influenced EHS' for the 2nd consecutive year by EHS Today. He can be reached at 800-395-1347 or info@proactsafety.com*.*

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