



Leading in the dark: Safety without strategic direction

A significant opportunity for sustainable safety improvement is a clearly communicated strategic direction in safety.

Recently, a plant manager led an all-hands meeting with the supervisors. He did so with the intent of discovering what was contributing to the recent injuries. He also wanted to understand if the supervisors were helping or hindering the efforts to improve. Unexpectedly, one of the supervisors asked the following question, "Could you help me understand what the strategic direction in safety is?" The plant manager responded honestly, "Well, that is actually a good question. I don't believe we have a clear direction in safety."

The manager looked around the room and asked for confirmation from his department leaders. The body language uncomfortably indicated agreement. The supervisor then politely responded in a hushed tone with a very profound question. He bravely inquired, "Sir, if you don't know what you want us to do, how are we supposed to know? And, how are we supposed to act accordingly?" This supervisor expressed a concern shared by

many first-line leaders.

Many well-intentioned executives believe their strategic safety direction has been successfully communicated. The sad truth is they are often wrong. Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw once said, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." If there is no clear, memorable and repeatable direction, can we really expect people to be working in unison toward the same goals?

Several years ago, I led an "Establishing Strategic Direction Workshop" with the executives of a highly respected global organization. During the brainstorming session to identify desirable performance motivators and demotivators, the COO offered the following perspective, "I just feel we aren't all on the same page in safety." I politely responded, "Well, where is this page?" If we want all levels in the organization to lead in the same direction, accomplish the same goals, instill consistent value, and judge their own performance against desired targets, they must work from the same page. The problem occurs when the page is yet to be created.

Communication is extremely hypercompetitive and difficult to do well. To determine the effectiveness of your strategic direction safety communication, consider answering the following eight questions:

1. Who helped in the creation of the strategy?

2. Have you validated knowledge transfer of the strategic direction to all levels of the organization?

3. Is there a sense of ownership and belief in the direction at all levels and all areas?

4. Is the direction behaviorally-actionable by any level in the organization?

5. How many times, by level, is the strategic direction behaviorally reinforced throughout the day?

6. Is there a balance of consequences (positive and negative) for those who contribute and those who act in opposition of the plan?

7. What motivators or demotivators exist in your systems and culture that might positively or negatively influence the direction?

8. If someone were to quiz your work

force to recite from memory the direction in safety, how many would be able?

Stephen King once wrote, "The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of because words diminish your feelings — words shrink things that seem timeless when they are in your head to no more than living size when they are brought out."

Establishing a believable, repeatable strategy in safety is one of those important yet hard things to articulate. Having a great plan in your head and passion in your heart is admirable and a great start. I hope you agree it's just not enough.

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