

Questioning Your Safety Strategy

Plato asserted that the unquestioned life was not worth living. It equally could be stated that the unquestioned safety strategy might not be worth following, either.



Even if you were satisfied with your safety performance last year, pursuing the same path won't ensure the same results this year. Small improvements to your strategy might not be sufficient. So, what questions should be asked about your safety strategy and how can the answers help improve results?

The first question you should ask about your safety strategy is, "Do we have one?" Many organizations have safety goals and call them strategies. There is a profound difference between what you want to achieve and how you plan to do so. A great follow-up question is, "What are we going to do that is basically different than what we did last year?" Simply changing the activities in your safety efforts is not the key. The key is to better focus those activities to maximize their results. Many organizations try to work harder on safety when they would be better served by working smarter.

Getting smart in safety involves asking additional questions:

In what aspects of safety last year did we do a good job? It often is easier and more effective to build on strengths than to correct weaknesses. If your organization does something really well in safety, you can fashion new strategies to utilize the same strengths.

What was our most common type of accident last year? It still amazes me that many safety strategies fail to target the most common type of accident happening in the organization. The same

amount of effort, better targeted, often can produce significant improvements.

What change in the workplace could make the greatest difference in that type of accident? Don't forget conditional safety. There almost always are improvements to be made in the workplace. The challenge is to make the changes that will produce the most improvements and avoid the expenditures that don't really make significant risk reductions.

What precaution could workers take that would have the greatest impact on the type(s) of accidents we had last year? This answer will help you identify the behavioral part of your safety strategy. A precaution is a behavior that significantly reduces the probability of an accident. A good safety strategy should target high-impact precautions.

Do workers know this information? If you discover a high-impact precaution, communicate this to the work force. Help them target the precaution and know the rationale for the targeting. Workers often are overloaded with safety information. Help them prioritize and focus. Even better, form a worker group or committee and allow them to discover the precaution by analyzing accident and/or near-miss data. Give them the opportunity to communicate their findings to their fellow workers. Remember Deming's observation, "People support what they help create."

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Are there barriers to taking this precaution? We all have been reminded that worker behavior is not the root cause of most accidents and that not all behavior can be changed at-will by workers. Look for conditions and other factors that would influence or limit a worker's decision to take the targeted precaution. If the precaution involves tools or equipment, including personal protective equipment, make sure the needed items readily are available and conveniently located. Also, look at current common practice around this precaution. Is it something most workers already do, or is it new to the culture? Don't underestimate the effort needed to make and sustain significant change.



How can we sell our new safety strategy to our workers?

That's right ... sell! Not communicate or train or share or command, but sell. If workers are not sold on the strategy, they will not give it the needed effort to be successful. Also remember that people seldom are sold on an idea that doesn't make sense or have a sound answer to the old WIIFM (What's In It For ME?). They also are not sold until they sense that the leaders are sold on the strategy. If the leaders don't walk the walk after delivering the talk, no one is sold.

How will we know our strategy is working?

Now, we are talking metrics. You still have the lagging indicators of frequency and severity rates and costs, but you also need performance indicators. Your performance metrics should tell you if you are

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working your plan, and the lagging indicators should tell you if your plan is working. If you target conditions, how long is the work order open? If you target precautions, what percent of the time are workers taking this precaution? It often is a good idea to also measure the awareness of the targeted issue among workers. If the strategy is not in their heads, it won't get into their habits.

What does success look like? Metrics are indicators of success, but what can you actually see or hear in the workplace or in safety meetings or in the break room that indicates that the strategy is being used and producing the desired results? Is there more awareness, more informal communication, more willingness to address safety issues, more suggestions, more mentoring of new employees? Thinking about the look and feel of success is an activity that can help detect success, but it is also an activity that can help formulate the strategy in the first place.

What will we do to positively reinforce those who use our strategy and help us succeed? Please don't limit this to incentives and rewards! Recognition and "making success visible" are very real forms of motivation and don't have the potential bad side effects that incentives and rewards often have. If workers feel successful and know their contributions are recognized, that is positive reinforcement.

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The old premise that what gets reinforced gets repeated can help you with this year's and next year's safety strategy. The success of any safety-improvement strategy will depend heavily on the buy-in and participation of the workers at the site. Maybe it would be a good idea to let them ask some of the questions and offer some of the answers.

EHS



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