Stop Saying Safety Is First
-by Shawn M. Galloway

The safest places in the world are the ones where no humans wander. Any place a human might venture could never be considered safe. Safety is defined by what we do, not by the result. Any time you reward a result, by default you reward the performance that accomplished it. Was the performance safe or lucky? If you don't know, how will you repeat that result next year?

It is still surprising how many organizations continue to define and celebrate safety as the absence of accidents. Yet, well-intended and competent CEOs persist that, "Safety means no accidents." Last year, the CEO of a fortune 500 company told me with all sincerity if his company's employees "followed the rules and policies and wore their PPE, they wouldn't get hurt. They would be safe." Intrigued by this statement, I asked him to define "working safe" for me. He responded with, "Performing a task in a manner that provides an injury-free outcome." Knowing this individual personally, I can attest he cares greatly for his tens of thousands of workers. While his statement might appear as logical, it was only partly correct.

Regardless, how you convey your feelings and what you say holds greater influence on others than how you feel. If we expect our employees to increase their intelligence regarding safety, we should start with ourselves first. Do we know what safety is and do we really believe safety is first?

Safety should be integrated into the fabric of organizational activity. The overused cliché, "Safety should become a value" is true, but even that is a self-limiting goal. The most basic priority of all organizations is to generate enough revenue to keep the doors open and the lights on. Safety is important and it must be the way, not the priority or value.

It is ideal for an executive to believe that having no accidents is the first priority. In fact, to state otherwise is obscene, unethical and irrational. However, the understanding of what safety "is" has changed. Safe means not being at risk, and not the absence of accidents. Achieving a zero injury or incident outcome is possible, but removing all risks from an industrial setting is not.

When we communicate that "Safety is first," "Safety is our top priority," or "We won't do the job if it can't be accomplished safely," we create situations in which to be proven wrong if safety is predicated on false beliefs. When statements like these are made, our credibility and trust is lost.

Moreover, when someone says, "Safety is first with the company," there is a chance that the sense of responsibility of the employee is diminished, or worse, removed. Of course, the employers' responsibility is to provide a safe work environment. It is not, however, their responsibility to be safe for the employees, on or off the job (where the greater exposure lies).

Proactive, self-accountability for safety performance is the responsibility of each employee, not the employer. Conditions are the responsibility of the employer. Further, mandatory behaviors are the responsibility of the employer, while discretionary actions are the employee's responsibility. This is often overlooked when companies are pursuing Behavior-Based Safety (BBS). If your incidents are the result of the deviation of rules, policies or procedures, you don't need BBS; you need to strengthen the capabilities of leadership.

The challenge many organizations face has to do with understanding how to hold others proactively accountable for safety performance, which is different than safety results. Consider answering this for yourself: are your expectations clear? If you answered 'yes', are the performance expectations clear, or just the results expectations? Most companies reactively hold others accountable for the results. "We didn't get the desirable results, so who needs to be held accountable?" This is reactive accountability. Are you proactively outlining what performance is expected and holding employees accountable prior to a review of the results? This is the differentiation of excellent-performing organizations.

It is likely this is not the first time you have heard me or others proposing this. A change in thinking is needed among advanced business degree programs for the change in common practice to occur. Safety professionals are quite versed in this terminology. However, from the point of view of a business and safety professional, the business world has done a poor job in creating and sharing this message among its professionals.

Industry business leaders must join in to sway public perception among business professionals about what safety really is, and help them realize what they already know - safety isn't first. Becoming and maintaining a profitable, revenue-generating organization is the top priority and the most important element of consideration. Without this, there would be no jobs, risky or otherwise. This might not be the popular thing to say, but it is reality. We can either face it, or continue to drive safety excellence through slogans.

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