



SAFETY LEADERSHIP

Spotlight Safety

Safety leaders need to focus on the significant few things that most impact safety, rather than trying to do too much.

Terry L. Mathis | Jan 09, 2019

If you had to work in the dark but you had a spotlight, where would you shine it? Would you aim it at the darkest places or the places where the light would do the most good? Most safety professionals have a limited amount of time and effort and it is not possible to do everything needed in safety. So where should you put your

attention and efforts? Should you put your effort into the areas that are worst or the areas that have the most potential to improve safety?

The late Stephen Covey created a model of time management in which he differentiated the things that are urgent from things that are important. He suggested that it is human nature to prioritize things that seem urgent and important. Then if we have time and effort left, we tend to focus on the things that are urgent but less important, thus neglecting the things that are important but not urgent. These things include developing and modifying strategy, preparation, planning, clarifying values, building relationships and culture, and creating empowerment. When we focus on the urgent at the expense of the important, we tend to neglect the things that can make the greatest difference.

Failing to focus on the things that are most critical to safety success has other negative side effects:

It frustrates safety efforts. Peter Drucker once proposed that there is nothing more useless than doing something well that should not be done at all. Misguided safety efforts don't always focus on totally useless things but often focus on things that have minimal impact on desired results. Workers try harder and get better, but results don't reflect their efforts. They get frustrated or discouraged and often quit giving their best efforts. They feel safety is a lost cause or at least one over which they have little or no control.

It sub-optimizes results. Pareto told us years ago that some efforts produce more results than others. He proposed that 20% of the effort often produces 80% of the results. If you are shining your light on that highly significant 20% (or some part of it), you can produce optimal results. If, however, you are working on the trivial 80% (or some part of it), you will put out a lot of effort to produce little or no results. One of the most common functions we do as consultants is discover the significant few behaviors and re-focus the organization on these. By doing so, the same amount of effort and resources produces significantly greater results.

It overloads itself. All too often when you are not focused on the significant few things that most impact safety, you are trying to do too much at once. Unfocused safety efforts are ineffective at best and a complete waste at worst. Over the past ten years, we have found almost all organizations are trying to do too much. They implement new programs on top of old programs and workers can feel overloaded and confused. Leaders say, “You can’t be too safe,” and workers disagree.

It fails to produce meaningful metrics. It is virtually impossible to measure everything that is being done to improve safety. In lieu of meaningful performance metrics, we tend to rely on results metrics, i.e., lagging indicators. Lagging indicators, while useful to management, are virtually useless to individual workers or work teams to determine if they are improving their performance or not. Measurements such as recordable rates and severity rates do not accurately reflect individual performance. These metrics are also so far removed from the worker performance that creates them that they have minimal impact. On the other hand, focused efforts allow measurement of a few specific improvement targets that do reflect daily performance of workers.

It misaligns culture. The best safety culture is not defined by characteristics, but by capabilities. When a culture tries to improve and fails, it degrades confidence in its abilities. Culture is what is shared among the group, and experiencing a failure is definitely a shared experience. Even putting out massive effort for mediocre results is damaging. Focusing on high-impact behaviors or conditions can create quick wins in safety. Such quick wins can motivate the culture and solidify their confidence in their ability to make meaningful improvement.

It undermines authority. When leaders dictate priorities and followers diligently carry them out, what happens? If priorities are improperly focused, effort will lead to small or no positive results. When this occurs, trust in leaders is diminished. If the next set of priorities also fail, the pattern is set for an ongoing loss of trust, which will ultimately undermine the respect for the authority of leaders.

It promulgates the focus on failing less. Safety efforts that are focused on results and not the conditions and behaviors that produce the results are aimed at failing less, not succeeding. A harbinger of this mindset is the lack of KPIs (key process indicators) or leading indicators. Lacking process metrics, most organizations try to manipulate lagging indicators and fall into hopelessly reactive practices. Accidents are defined as failures but it often takes an accident to prompt further improvements. At one organizational assessment, workers identified multiple hazards in the workplace that had not been addressed. They asked each other who wanted to volunteer to get injured on these hazards so they could get them fixed. It was a tongue-in-cheek statement but reflected management's priorities of managing safety reactively rather than proactively.

If a general is losing a battle, he should not pick up a gun and start shooting at the enemy. He should focus on what could potentially win the battle or successfully retreat. Too many safety leaders grab the gun. They get themselves so busy fighting fires that they don't have time to analyze their data and develop priorities. They are shining the spotlight on the darkest areas rather than the areas that could make the most of the light.

Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety , has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over. A respected strategist and thought leader in the industry, Mathis has authored five books, numerous articles and blogs. EHS Today has named him one of the "50 People Who Most Influenced EHS" four times. He can be reached at info@proactsafety.com or 800-395-1347.

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