



Evolving from focusing on to focusing in safety

What are your employees focused on to keep themselves safe? What are the essential things employees should pay attention to, and what precautions should they remember to take to prevent the most severe or common injury? How correctly aligned is their focus, and what does your data show the focus should be? Are you just focusing on safety, or have you developed a focus in safety? All companies mature to the point where throwing more resources and programs at problems no longer adds new value. When you reach this point, specificity is needed.

“Safety first.” “A safe way leads the way.” “Think safety.” “Be safe.” “No job is so important it can’t be done safely.” “Safety starts here.” Do any of these sound familiar? Starting meetings with a safety share, leaders giving heartfelt messages on why safety is personally important to them, and presentations from previously injured employees turned into professional speakers are all tools and well-meaning attempts to prompt people. The hope is they will help employees focus on safety, think before

acting or take the potential outcomes of a deviation from a standardized work practice more seriously. Many of these tools eventually become not specific enough, meaningless, or worse, can lead the employee to believe safety is taken care of by the company and there is not much more they need to do.

Focusing on safety makes sense in low-maturity cultures. Eventually, these tools and methods reach a point of diminishing returns as the safety culture matures. The tools we use to focus on safety will become obsolete. When this occurs, you must evolve to a focus in safety.

As introduced in our 2013 book, *STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence*, safety, while certainly not simple, is three things:

1. Knowing the risks that could lead to serious injuries and fatalities (SIFs). It is also knowing the common risks, which are typically identified as low-probability risks, one’s people might take several times a day or hour.

2. Knowing the precautions to control the risks. Some precautions are mandatory. Think of control of hazardous energy (lockout/tag-

out) or entering a confined space without obtaining a permit. In contrast, other precautions would be voluntary at the individual’s discretion. Think of ensuring you keep your eyes on your work or travel direction.

3. Ensuring people are regularly taking desired precautions. The mandatory precautions that address SIF potential risks are controlled through management oversight and positive enforcement, containing a balance of consequences. The voluntary precautions that primarily address low-probability risks are addressed with the tools of influence and coaching. While these are all tools of prevention, knowing humans make mistakes, especially in complex environments, what are the recovery systems they should know about or what should they know about how to respond to unwanted events?

If you do not get a particular focus in someone’s conscious memory, it will never get into their subconscious. You have to get it into their heads before you can get it into their habits. With this formula in mind, what is the focus of the employees? What are the SIF and common practice risks they should

give focus to? What are the most essential mandatory and voluntary precautions employees should give attention to? What are your leaders doing proactively to ensure compliance, and are they influencing and coaching for discretionary effort? When a deviation from an expected outcome occurs, where is the focus directed?

Employees everywhere are focusing on something to accomplish an injury-free day. How confident are you that their focus is accurate? Evolve from focusing on to developing a focus in safety.

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