

# Safety and Performance Excellence: New Beginnings

[Terry L. Mathis](#)

Tue, 2017-01-31 16:35

Meeting safety goals is a delicate balance between objectives, strategy and expected performance.

Humans tend to dwell on the past, especially on past shortcomings or failures. We treat them like anchors and let them drag down our performance, leaving us with the feeling that no amount of effort can quite overcome them. We let them overshadow our successes.

The magic of new beginnings is letting go of past demotivators. We file them away in a drawer marked "over and done with" and turn our eyes toward the future with the freedom to shape our own success. In safety, we track our failures (accidents, lost time, costs, etc.) for a period and then start over. This new beginning can be motivating and can spark renewed efforts.

However, in too many organizations, this simply doesn't happen. Among our consulting clients, this failure often is most due to one or more of four specific causes, all of which concern the setting of goals for the new period. This does not suggest goals are the problem or failing to set goals is the answer. It simply means there are four common issues with goals that carefully should be avoided.

## 1. Perfectionistic Goals

Many organizations set and communicate goals to be perfect with safety. Zero-accidents thinking is not erroneous, but potentially is self-defeating. There is a fine line between establishing a tolerance for accidents either by setting less-than-perfect goals or by expecting perfection, which might demotivate performance.

Directors and C-suite executives tend to set goals to meet organizational objectives without fully considering how they impact the morale and motivation of the average worker. That both is unfortunate and sub-optimized since it collectively is workers' performance that impacts the metric on which the goal is set.

## 2. No Specific Strategy to Achieve Goal Results

Both zero goals and other specific numerical goals often are based on desired trends or other wishful thinking. There inherently is nothing wrong with a specific numeric goal unless there is no strategy for achieving it.

Improvement is a stepped process. If clear-cut improvement steps are not prioritized and addressed, they seldom are accomplished. Yet many organizational leaders simply set the goal to be some percent better than last year with no particular plan other than to pay more attention or try harder. Such goals are akin to athletic coaches telling their players to run faster or fumble less often.

Leaders should not set goals to improve results and expect their employees to figure out how to make that happen without either involving them in the selection of the goals or by giving them a precise plan for making the stepped improvements to lead to goal achievement.

## 3. Over-Incentivizing Success

Many organizations that fail to produce desired improvement, or are new to the goal-setting process, try to ensure success through offering incentives. Safety incentives are among the most problematic programs we encounter.

Even when intelligent people with good intentions design the incentive process, they fail more often than they succeed. In addition to failing to improve safety performance, some incentives actually make safety worse.

There are three common problems with incentives. First, you can replace intrinsic motivation (caring about safety) with extrinsic rewards. In addition, once you have offered an incentive for some period of time, the incentive almost always has to be increased to keep working. This is not just a one-time increase, but regular increases.

Lastly, if the incentive sufficiently is valuable, some workers will attempt to cheat the system to get the reward without improving safety. This cheating includes the most dangerous type of safety subterfuge: non-reporting. There are two ways to appear excellent in safety: to not have accidents or to not report them (and not get caught). OSHA has realized this problem and made a standard forbidding incentives or rewards strictly based on not having accidents.

### **Goals without Progress Metrics**

Several recent studies of performance motivation have concluded that visible progress toward specific goals is one of the best motivators. However, many safety goals strictly are based on lagging indicators, which are not communicated back to workers on a regular basis.

Even well-communicated safety metrics like recordable rates relatively are meaningless to workers who cannot see their personal progress or department successes in the numbers. Motivational metrics are those that directly can be correlated with effort and performance.

Setting strategic goals as discussed in #2 empowers organizations to develop numerous key performance indicators (KPIs) that potentially are more meaningful and motivational to average workers.

When an organization sets goals, it also should establish a metrics scoreboard to make progress visible on a timely basis to everyone involved in achieving the goal. Such metrics also can prompt celebrations of success and recognition of key players who helped. This approach not only involves the establishment of meaningful metrics, but the effective communication of them as well. The most successful organizations simply do not send out information, they also measure how well and completely the communication is received, remembered and acted upon.

Setting goals is key to improvement. It has been said it is better to aim at the moon and miss than to aim at nothing and hit it. However, the moon may not be your best target and some goals can be self-defeating. There are many formulas for setting effective goals, but safety goals can be somewhat different from other organizational goals. Setting safety goals that are realistic with a specific strategy to achieve them, step-by-step, and measuring progress toward them in an effective way almost always will eliminate the need for incentives and their potential problems.

*Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations. A respected strategist and thought leader in the industry, Mathis has authored four books, numerous articles and blogs and is known for his dynamic and engaging presentations. EHS Today has named him one of the "50 People Who Most Influenced EHS" four consecutive times. Mathis can be reached at [info@proactsafety.com](mailto:info@proactsafety.com) or 800-395-1347.*

**Source URL:** <http://ehstoday.com/safety-leadership/safety-and-performance-excellence-new-beginnings>