



## **SAFETY LEADERSHIP**

### **Oversimplification: Four Approaches to Guarantee Limited Safety Improvement**

*One factor that often impedes organizational progress toward safety excellence is when leaders oversimplify the issues.*

Terry L. Mathis | Feb 09, 2018

Leaders who oversimplify issues quickly can be identified by asking them for their definition of safety. When they start with the trite platitudes like “thinking before you act” or “paying attention,” then you suspect they have an overly-simplistic view.

Likewise, when they throw up their hands and admit they don't know how to improve safety, it is an indicator that they either misunderstand or overly simplify the problem. Such leaders tend to practice and promote four approaches that almost guarantee limited safety improvement.

**Over-simplified definition** – The thinking of organizational leaders often is reflected in their communication to associates. Good followers listen carefully to their leaders to discern priorities and preferred practices. Leaders who oversimplify safety tend to influence others to do likewise. When a whole organization thinks they already are doing what is required in safety, progress becomes problematic. There is no clear path forward and workers tend to feel safety improvement is beyond their control.

This mindset often is reinforced by safety metrics that don't reflect any improvement. Frustration often follows because trying harder doesn't produce better results. At this point, many organizations develop a "more is better" mentality. If this level of effort is not producing improvement, we must not be doing enough. This can lead to adopting the latest program of the month or following industry trends rather than accurately defining the site-specific problems and solutions. This leads to and is complicated by the next issue, a lack of an overarching safety strategy.

**Lack of strategy** – If safety is viewed as simply thinking and paying attention, there is no need to develop a strategy for doing so. Leaders can command workers to do so and it will happen. The problem is, it either does not happen or it fails to improve safety. The lack of strategy most often manifests itself in the tendency mentioned earlier: to adopt the program of the month.

Programmatic thinking is the diametric opposite of strategic thinking. Throwing a group of often unrelated programs at a problem is not a strategy. Almost all organizations have strategies for some aspects of their mission. For-profit organizations often include elaborate marketing strategies to compete in the

marketplace. These strategies often include market analysis to determine who their customers are and what those customers want or need.

Unfortunately, few organizations apply this strategic thinking to safety. They fail to recognize their workers are the customers of safety, not the problem to be controlled. Once workers are recognized as internal customers, excellent safety becomes an application of the same strategic thinking: find out what the customers want and need, and develop a strategy to provide it to them.

Strategy is how to win. In safety, strategy is winning the war against accidental injuries. An overly simplistic view of how accidents happen can make such victory difficult or impossible.

**Managing with lagging indicators** – In his book, *Transforming Performance Measurement*, Dean Spitzer boldly states that most organizations don't get what they want precisely because they don't measure "what they want." What almost all organizations measure in safety is what they don't want. They measure accidents, quantity and severity. They calculate the ratio of accidents to hours worked. They measure lost time and both direct and indirect costs of accidents.

They do not measure the factors that prevent accidents. Even if you think safety is as simple as thinking before you act, why not measure how many times workers think first and how many times they don't? Lagging indicators are measures of failure. That is why most organizations are not trying to succeed in safety; they simply are trying to fail less than they did previously.

With no accurate definition of what safety is, how do you develop a vision of what success looks like? Without such a vision, how do you strive to succeed? Without a success metric, how do you know if you are improving or not? Most organizations simply look at failure metrics and consider reduction as success. The problem with that thinking is that lagging indicators can respond to luck and normal variation as well as effective improvement efforts. When lagging indicators move, it can be difficult to tell with any degree of certainty what made them move. Individual

workers are even more removed from these metrics. They almost all fail to see how their efforts impact the numbers.

**Delegation** – Leaders tend to delegate all or most of the business functions in which they do not have specific training or expertise. Leaders to whom safety is simple or mysterious tend to hand off the whole effort to a safety specialist. Too few organizations have a leader at the C-suite level dedicated to safety.

This is another direct result of underestimating the importance and complexity of safety. If safety is a simple matter, hand it off to a lower-level person to make it happen. Lower-level personnel tend to manage rather than lead. They think tactically rather than strategically. This often results in safety efforts being focused on basic compliance rather than on true excellence. Lower-level safety personnel are, unfortunately, often used as scapegoats when safety results are unsatisfactory. This is a further indication of leaders who oversimplify safety and think that a good safety cop is all that is needed.

These four practices are ones that organizations all too often have allowed to rob them of their shot at safety excellence. In almost every case, they grew out of the influence of organizational leaders who did not fully grasp what safety excellence is or how to achieve it. Some leaders recognize their own knowledge deficits and are wonderfully open to suggestions. Others hold on stubbornly to their over-simplified thinking and pursue their existing practices with predictable results.

All progress begins with thinking differently. Leaders open to new thoughts are the ones who create progress.

*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 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.*

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