



LEADERS
SOMETIMES
BLAME THEIR
CULTURE WHEN
THEY CAN'T
DETERMINE THE
CAUSE OF THEIR
PERFORMANCE
ISSUES.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Safety leaders need to plug the gap between current safety performance and excellent safety performance.

Between your current level of safety performance and excellent safety performance there is a gap. If you are going to reach excellence, you must bridge that gap. Before you can bridge it, you must identify the basic elements that create it.

When I was in charge of training at a large corporation, I regularly had top executives ask me to design training to address a problem they had identified. Often, training was not the right tool to fix their problem, and as I helped them develop other strategies to address problems, they started to more accurately identify problems and solutions. Training slowly ceased to be the fix-all that was automatically used for every issue.

W. Edwards Deming said that if you can't describe what you are doing as a process, you don't know what you are doing. Organizational leaders are generally good at describing manufacturing, production and delivery of service as a process. They are often less astute in describing human performance as a process. I too often still hear leaders say things like, "If workers would just pay attention," or "If people would just think before they act," or "If we could just get rid of these stupid mistakes, we would be better." Such statements are the catchphrases of those who do not see human performance as a process. In a process, defects have specific causes which must be addressed to solve the problem. Below are some of the common elements of human performance that may contribute to suboptimal performance.

CONDITIONAL ISSUES

If workstations and workflow are not designed to facilitate the tasks and allow for good ergonomics, this should be addressed first. Physical barriers to performance can seldom be overcome with behavioral approaches. Awkward or dangerous working conditions can and will cause performance problems and must be addressed by improving conditions. Sending workers back for training will not correct conditional barriers. The

safety hierarchy of controls can help decide how to address conditional issues if you truly start from the top and don't regularly rely on administrative or PPE controls.

KNOWLEDGE

Sometimes workers do not perform well because they lack the knowledge of what excellence is and/or how it is achieved. Leaders cannot simply ask workers if they know how to do their jobs well because workers don't know what they don't know. Job knowledge should be the main curriculum in training, and supervisors should be trained to look for both excellent and sub-standard performance.



SHUTTERSTOCK/DREAMSTIME

Safety performance is dependent on two other types of knowledge. We call the first hazard recognition. Workers who do not know what can hurt them on the job and how injuries

can happen are working blindly. The second kind of knowledge involves precautions to address the hazards. In other words, workers need to know what can hurt them and how to keep that from happening. If your poor performance is due wholly or in part from a lack of knowledge, training can be all or part of your answer.

SKILL

A worker can know how to do a job but lack the skill to do it. Some skills can be taught but others require special talents to perform well. If you have a skill deficit that is causing poor performance, you should improve your selection process and explore how you could transfer workers without the skill to do their jobs to other jobs in the organization. If workers have the basic skills to do the job but the skills are not well developed, then further training and coaching may be the answer.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Excellence is seldom achieved without systematic accountability. Too many supervisors and leaders think of accountability as simply correcting or punishing poor performance. True accountability

requires coaching skills to set and constantly reinforce standards of performance and expectations of results. Effective accountability involves positive reinforcement for excellent performance as well as correction for mistakes or low-level performance.

Workers need to know their roles, their responsibilities and the results expected. This is often undermined by a lack of good metrics at the individual performance level. If training is used to address accountability issues, it is usually training supervisors and managers versus training workers.

CULTURE

Leaders sometimes blame their culture when they cannot really determine the cause of their performance issues. The problem with trying to improve a company culture or the safety part of the culture is that culture is a byproduct of other issues. Trying to change a culture directly is tantamount to trying to change an attitude directly. Without realizing what caused the problem in the culture and addressing that, other efforts to improve culture are relatively futile.

METRICS

Dr. Dean Spitzer told us that many organizations don't get what they want precisely because they don't measure what they want. In safety, we mostly measure what we don't want: accident frequency, accident severity, lost time, direct and indirect costs of accidents, etc. These metrics often prompt workers' performance to aim at not

failing rather than at succeeding.

Organizations with excellent safety performance have a vision of success and metrics that indicate proximity to that vision. Organizational leaders also need to realize how what they choose to measure puts a spotlight on what workers perceive to be most important. Some performance problems are caused simply by measuring the wrong thing or failing to measure the right thing. Others are caused by using data to knee-jerk react rather than using it to understand and then strategically react.

As a corporate problem-solver and then as a consultant helping other organizations solve problems, I have found that most leaders are great problem-solvers if they focus on the right problems, and that they often have the right answers if they simply ask the right questions. Socrates said that to prescribe before you diagnose is malpractice. When leaders fail to carefully diagnose the true causes of their performance problems, they not only fail to make things better but often make them seriously worse and degrade workers' perceptions of them as leaders **EHS**

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