



TO CREATE THE KIND OF FOCUS THAT PROMOTES IMPROVEMENT, START BY DEFINING WHAT SAFETY IS AND HOW TO CREATE IT.

DOES YOUR SAFETY REPORT CARD HAVE THREE FS?

Improving safety performance involves three elements: focus, feedback and facilitation.

When I was in school, an F was a failing grade. Having one or more on your report card could result in undesirable consequences. However, now that I am past the basic part of my ongoing education, I feel free to use the alphabet more liberally.

Improving safety performance is about three elements that all start with the letter F. Unfortunately, I don't find these three elements in many of the client sites I work with. Some have one or two, but almost none have all three. Many misunderstand or under utilize these elements to the detriment of their improvement efforts.

The three elements are focus, feedback and facilitation.

Most improvement efforts in safety are either unfocused or too overly ambitious to create focus. Improvement needs to be divided into doable steps and not an overall goal of becoming perfect. The most common problem I encounter is that the client is trying to do too much at once. The second most common problem is that if they are not making the desired progress, they think the answer is to do more rather than to do better.

These two mindsets undermine the majority of safety improvement efforts where they exist. The alternative to this is the 3-F approach. Let's examine each of these and then see how they work synergistically together.

FOCUS

I find there is an underlying assumption that workers know what safety is and how to make it happen. When I interview workers, I do not always find that to be true. Few organizations have a defined and shared definition of safety. Workers can tell me the goals of safety, but the only methodologies they name are following rules and procedures or "think before you act."

To create the kind of focus that promotes improvement, start by defining what safety is and how to create it. I recommend a definition such as "know the risks, know the precautions to ad-

dress the risks, and take those precautions every time." After you have focused workers on a common definition, you need to determine specific safety improvement targets. You can't become perfect at everything at once, but you can work toward perfection in a few areas over the near term.

Once you have reached your targeted improvements, you can move on to other targets. The journey to safety excellence begins with a single step. Once your workforce knows how to step, they can put as many steps together as needed to reach your performance goals.



FEEDBACK

If there is one F that is most used by organizations, it is feedback. However, feedback without focus is not only less effective, it is sometimes destructive.

Without a specific focus, feedback is largely or wholly subjective. Without training and guidance, feedback tends to be wholly negative. Those giving feedback overlook everything positive and become critics of the negative.

One organization I was working with recently encouraged their safety professionals to catch workers doing something safe and give them positive reinforcement feedback. Many reported having trouble finding meaningful positive behaviors to reinforce. They also had to bite their tongues to not criticize workers' poor safety performance.

When you focus on specific safety improvements, feedback is directed to those targeted improvements. Either the worker being observed did them or did not. The subjectivity is gone, and the feedback becomes concrete and objective.

This type of feedback benefits from focus and reinforces the focus areas. Workers can see progress toward targeted goals and how to improve their own performance to accomplish said goals. A past Harvard study concluded that seeing progress toward specific goals was one of the most effective motivators toward performance improvement.

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FACILITATION

The Latin root of this word means “easy.” When you facilitate safety, you make it easier for workers to do their jobs safely. The most effective approach to feedback is twofold: 1) to positively reinforce and encourage continuation of targeted safe behaviors, and 2) to determine the influences driving unsafe behaviors in the targeted areas.

It is naïve to think that one instance of verbal feedback can change a safety practice that is reinforced by habit or other organizational factors. If feedback determines what is facilitating at-risk behaviors, the logical next step is to work with those facilitating factors to align them toward safer performance. Good facilitation often involves four broad areas:

Perceptions—Workers’ perception of risk often varies by their individual experiences in the workplace. Perceptions can be managed and aligned with the desired focus. Doing so will facilitate safe performance.

Habits—Past patterns of behavior can be strong but can also be facilitated to change with spaced reinforcement from feedback and other reminders.

Obstacles—Some workplace issues can make it difficult to perform work safely; such issues can be addressed or modified to make it easier to be safe.

Barriers—Some workplace conditions can make it impossible to perform work safely; such conditions cannot always be eliminated, but sometimes workarounds can be found. If that is

not possible, everyone can be made more aware of the dangers so they can proceed with caution.

Safety programs have been developed to encourage organizations to examine workplace influences and align them to desired performance. The 3-F approach can give such efforts more practical data to accomplish this purpose.

Safety improvement efforts often fail. The common causes of failure are trying to do too much at once and failing to follow the 3-F approach.

If you align your workforce on a common definition of safety and set some specific improvement targets (focus), establish a process of giving regular feedback that positively reinforces workers achieving the targeted improvements and discovers the influences keeping them from that achievement, and work to amend the influences and align them to produce the desired safety improvements (facilitation), then safety excellence is most often the result that follows. **EHS**

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