

LIFE LESSONS IN SAFETY

Reflections on a career spent helping companies improve workplace safety.

As I prepare to retire from my position as CEO of the consulting firm I founded, I have been reflecting on my experiences over the past 28 years at ProAct Safety and the years before that in the corporate world.

Although every project had its own individual challenges and opportunities, I have gleaned thematic similarities across many of them. I hesitate to make such sweeping generalities but believe my reflections can still be relevant and helpful to those pursuing safety excellence. Some of my past clients may see some of their own issues in these comments. They are not meant to be criticisms but rather descriptions of the starting places from which our improvement efforts began.

I challenge each of you reading to ask yourself if these issues are still present in your safety efforts and if there are opportunities for further improvement. Also, look for strengths in your people and processes that can be reinforced and propagated.

LEADERS

Some organizational leaders lead safety. Some do so successfully, and some try and fail. Many organizational leaders completely delegate safety and turn their attention to what they consider the core of their organization's mission. While many leaders strive for greatness, only a few realize that their real challenge is not being a great leader but in leading great people.

Truly great leaders spend most of their efforts coaching and mentoring their direct reports and often a few levels further down the org chart. Leaders, like citizens and parents, often find themselves thrust into their roles with little or no formal training. Even seasoned leaders do a lot of learning on the job. Wise leaders who are new to their positions evaluate existing structure and staffing before making drastic changes. Seeing how their predecessors ran things can be a critical element of their learning curve.

SAFETY PROFESSIONALS

Depending on the staffing of the safety department, safety professionals range from file clerks to strategic leaders. All too many safety managers are buried in paperwork and reacting to accidents. Those who manage to climb out of that state usually do so either by working for small organizations or by having adequate staffing to free them for strategic thinking. Even those who have the luxury of strategic thinking seldom do so effectively due to a lack of training or an oversimplification of safety as a set of programs and activities.

When asked what one thing, if done differently, would be of the greatest benefit to safety, most safety professionals don't have a ready answer. They are trying to eat their safety elephant all at once rather than prioritizing improvements and approaching them one bite at a time.

STRATEGY

If safety strategy is developed by the safety department and organizational strategy is set by organizational leaders, the two may clash. When they do, the safety strategy always loses. It can also create a dichotomy for workers when their production boss and their safety boss give them conflicting instructions.

To see at a glance whether these two strategies synergize or compete, look at the org chart. If safety reports through another functional VP such as HR or Production, the safety strategy is isolated from organizational leadership. In the best performing organizations, safety has a seat at the table and is viewed as a core value that must be considered in every decision.

Many safety efforts are an assembly of programs and activities with no common core or alignment. Strategy is the development of a unique plan to succeed that aligns all efforts toward common goals and methodologies. It must breach the walls of organizational silos and include all departments and divisions to define their specific contribution to safety efforts. Many of my clients argued that they had a safety strate-



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gy until we involved them in a workshop to develop one. Almost all expanded their thinking about safety strategy after considering all the elements included in other organizations' strategies.

CULTURE

When I wrote my first book on safety culture in 1993, the concept was still new, even foreign, to most of my clients. Behavior-Based Safety (BBS) was the latest in vogue safety process and the pursuit of that was as close as most organizations got to safety culture development. Most organizational and safety leaders did not have a common definition of what culture was or how to improve it.

When DuPont introduced the Bradley Curve, many jumped on the concept since it presented defined steps to culture improvement. While it served well as a road map, it did not come with a vehicle or driving instructions. One simply envisioned success, hoped for the best and attempted to measure or estimate progress from one step to the next.

When publishing company John Wiley & Sons asked me to write another book on safety culture, there were already another dozen or more books on the subject. The thinking had advanced significantly, as had the priority. Organizations were realizing how important and valuable safety culture could be, and they were hungry for instructions on how to develop one. Excellent organizations pursued safety culture excellence with enthusiasm while others watched from the sidelines.

WORKFORCE ENGAGEMENT

Over my career, the word "engagement" largely replaced the word "motivation." Motivation had an element of artificial enthusiasm to many leaders while engagement was more of an operational term for the right mindset and performance.

I found that the vision of motivation varied greatly among organizations. Some simply wanted buy-in to their approach. Others wanted physical participation in safety efforts. The most forward-thinking wanted both but ultimately also wanted worker ownership of their safety efforts. The best approaches utilized worker creative input to build ownership. The lesser attempts simply tried a sales pitch to convince workers to believe and participate.

Organizations contact safety consultants when they perceive a problem or opportunity. Those with the least success defined their own condition and put out an RFP for bids to address it. The organizations with the greatest success asked for help defining their status and customizing an intervention to directly impact the core of the issue(s). Consider these generalizations from my 30-plus years of experience in improving safety and see if you can benefit from them. Best wishes for your success! **EHS**

Terry L. Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over. He is retiring and will be succeeded by Shawn Galloway, president of ProAct Safety. Terry will continue to write and speak on safety topics and share his years of experience through these media. Shawn can be reached at info@proactsafety.com or (800) 395-1347.

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