



# Thinking about thinking about safety

**W**hat if the current ways we handle many things in safety — like measuring success, creating additional well-intended controls, or accountability and responsibility — suddenly became illegal? Our current paradigms will both help and hinder our ability to advance and shape safety performance and culture. Paradigms hinder us when our perceived ability to solve problems is based on possibly outdated assumptions, belief in current knowledge and capabilities that might not be accurate or, more simply, old ways of thinking. What type of thinking currently limits your ability to experience breakthrough results? What methods of problem-solving keep you repeating the same interventions? What better questions would prompt leadership to think differently about adding more significant and sustainable value?

The late Maltese physician, psychologist, author, inventor, philosopher and consultant Edward de Bono coined the term “lateral thinking.” He sought to show the constraints of a linear, straight line of steps to thinking and teaching in order to reveal there were other ways to approach problems. We tend to use past data and experi-

ences and think in terms of “if/then.” Experience teaches, and this often reinforces paradigms and past practices. All progress begins by thinking differently. We need to think differently about how we pursue safety excellence.

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Few people like the idea of additional and more stringent rules. As oversight by regulatory agencies and the fines they impose has historically increased, companies who wish to maintain their license to operate have reacted. While not ideal, and not all rules or regulations are perfect, this becomes an excellent motivator for improving worker safety. Why not leverage this future reality as an idea for changing existing paradigms? What if the ways we

currently manage safety became illegal and, if not changed, resulted in a significant fine or possible prison sentencing by the occupational health and safety regulator? Below are some examples of how some organizations have found more efficient and worker-supported approaches simply by asking better questions.

What if it became illegal to track the severity or frequency of injuries and incidents? How would you track improvement? Would you move away from measuring how the company is failing less in order to create the system capacity to prevent and recover from the exposure to hazards and risks as work is performed?

What if doing more to improve safety or overcome hazards and risks than what is locally or federally mandated became illegal? Would we declutter our self-imposed or knee-jerk reactions that currently make up the safety management systems and make it easier and less confusing to make the safe choice?

What if disciplining someone for a safety violation became illegal? Would we start adopting that mistakes are normal and move our attention to improving the systems and culture our people work within?

What if safety professionals doing more than coaching, giving advice and never owning programs, activities or results became illegal? Would we drive ownership and operationalize safety among line leadership? Even better, would we drive the decision-making away from the blunt end of the stick and closer to the sharp end of the stick, where work is actually performed?

What other questions would prompt different thinking? What other practices, if they became illegal, would help you move the conversation and improvement forward differently? Please consider sharing your thoughts with the author.

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