

Behind the Bradley Curve

The pursuit of improved organizational safety has passed through any number of phases.



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A hot topic today is safety culture. The concept that a population can become a homogenous group that practices and reinforces safe practices, and passes such practices down to future members of the group, is appealing at many levels.

Since the concept of culture is not clearly defined nor a part of everyday management practice, organizational leaders have struggled to understand exactly how to make a culture better. A model called the Bradley Curve has become a popular way of thinking about cultural development.

The backstory is that a plant manager named Bradley in a company seeking to improve safety read Stephen Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. In this book, Covey proposes that, as people form these seven habits and become more effective, they progress through three stages. He labels these stages dependent, independent and interdependent.

Bradley repurposed these labels as the stages a safety culture should go through as it progresses. Many organizations rate their own safety culture according to where it currently is on the curve. The overlaid idea is that progression through these three

stages will correlate to decreases in lagging indicators such as recordable rates.

Covey argues a person cannot be a contributing member of a group without first developing the ability to function independently. Thus, a person must become independent before becoming able to collaborate and team up with others who also are capable of independence. The resulting uniting of independent persons forms the last category called interdependence. In this state, people benefit from others without diminishing or depending on them.

Since Covey was talking about individuals and Bradley was talking about groups of people, there is an underlying assumption that the individuals in the group pass through these stages at relatively the same time. A layer below this assumption is a nebulous idea that the individuals in this cultural group are doing some undefined thing causing the progression.

While the concept of progressing through these three stages potentially is descriptive, it is not prescriptive. Covey did not say progression through these stages was the goal; he said it was the outcome of forming the seven habits.



Making Lagging Into Leading

In safety terminology, this three-stage progression is a lagging indicator. What affects the movement of this lagging indicator is the adoption of the seven habits. Covey defines habits as having three elements: knowledge, skill and desire. This would indicate that an organization that wanted its safety culture to progress through these three stages would need to do as Covey did: identify the habits to make safety efforts effective, give their workers knowledge of those habits, train workers in the skills to perform them habitually and motivate them to do so.

This thinking suggests at least three types of key process indicators (KPIs) that could provide the Bradley Curve with some leading indicators and make it a more proactive process.

The most common misconception we find organizational leaders making about the Bradley Curve and other approaches to improving safety culture is the idea that the goal is to develop certain characteristics within the culture. If you call effectiveness a characteristic, Covey would likely agree. An effective person is one who can and does get things done. The three stages of progression describe the growth of ability and the maturity of interaction

with others. Again, these do not cause the growth or progression, but result from it. The cause of the growth is adoption of the seven critical habits.

Covey proposed the following seven habits that can be applied to safety effectiveness as well as overall effectiveness. Think about how they might apply.

Be proactive – Safety historically is reactive, waiting until an accident happens to take action. What if we proactively address risks before they result in unwanted and unplanned events?

Begin with the end in mind – Safety tends to avoid failure rather than achieve success. Envisioning what safety success looks like sans the OSHA log is a great way to work toward the desired state rather than away from the undesired.

Put first things first – When we visit sites, we often find a lot of effort going into unimportant activities and little or no effort focused on the transformational opportunities. Prioritization should be a big part of all safety efforts.

Think win-win – Often, safety is a battle with management trying to control workers rather than a collaborative effort in which everyone benefits.

Seek first to understand then to be understood – Most safety programs have little to no input from workers. When the voice of the worker truly is understood, the needs of workers become clear. Safety can give workers what they need to be safe rather than what leaders think they need.

Synergize – Interdependence without true synergy can be dangerously close to codependence. It is not just interaction needed, but interaction that truly multiplies individual efforts. When the whole culture is more than the sum of the parts, then synergy is happening.

Sharpen the saw – Covey uses this old saying to describe continuous improvement, not just in production but in the means of production. If you just keep sawing and don't sharpen the blade, you exert more and more effort for less and less accomplishment. In safety, we should focus on positive influences and not just daily performance.

According to the man who first proposed the terminology in the so-called Bradley Curve, these were the habits that enabled people to move through these three stages. But progression through the stages was not the goal. The goal was to form habits that made one more effective.

Simply improving skills and making a culture more interactive won't necessarily make that happen. An excellent safety culture is one that can effectively improve itself and reinforce the habits that enable it to improve. If safety is going to "borrow" from Covey, it should adopt the whole concept and not just one aspect of it.

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