



Is Failing Less a Better Safety Goal than Achieving Success?

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An entrepreneur, attempting to establish a new business, selling what he believes will be a groundbreaking new product, meets with a group of prospective investors. During a discussion about his strategy and business plan, the exchange turns to measurement. An investor asks him how he will measure his success, and the entrepreneur responds with, "Well, simple. I will know I have a successful business when indicators validate I haven't upset a single customer." Sounds absurd, doesn't it?

Further, imagine a team coach gathering the players in the pre-game locker room for a strategy and motivational pep-talk, announcing to the group, "Alright, folks, I want you to go out there and not screw up! That's how we will win this game!" A former Coca-Cola Company CEO, Roberto Goizueta, said, "The moment avoiding failure becomes your motivation, you're down the path of inactivity. You stumble only if you're moving." Businesses and athletes do not succeed and reach excellence by failing less. We know this; yet this is how we still, today, manage safety efforts.

What happens if an employee does something wrong in safety, or if an employee goes above and beyond? Safety is notoriously focused on what not to do with increasing rules and a heavier emphasis on progressive discipline than progressive recognition, leading to many employees disengaging and working to avoid safety conversations, initiatives, and communication. Within your organization, what currently motivates an employee to do more than what is necessary (e.g., rules, policies, procedures)? What currently demotivates them? What has greater weight on operational decisions and behaviors, the present motivational or demotivational aspects of work life?

Motivation and demotivation are intrinsic. However, leaders construct environments conducive to the creation of a motivated or demotivated workforce. Many times, this has a lot to do with the goals that are set and the measurements used against them. Measurement is supposed to provide insight into results and what to do to improve, *and* prompt and motivate action. When measurement is focused more on the reduction of failures rather than on progress toward, and recognition of, visible success, mistrust and avoidance behavior are often created. These are not characteristics of highly effective cultures.

Forecasting and Strategic Planning

Most organizations still struggle with evolving past zero injury goal measurements. An injury, like a quality defect, is a systems error. It is doubtful that the reader's safety management system was created with purposeful gaps

and chinks in the armor. However, when an employee is injured, they have just found one. Reacting to this event to learn and prevent future occurrences is, without question, vital. Safety excellence is never reached by exclusively managing failures and reacting perfectly. Business excellence is the continuous quest to repeat great results, knowing precisely how the results were obtained, having confidence in the forecasting of even better performance, and a healthy discontent for the status-quo while continually searching for a better way.

Greater difficulty lies not in achieving zero injuries, but in the ability to confidently articulate why it was reached and how it will be repeated and improved upon in the future. This requires the ability to forecast and strategically plan. Such a plan toward safety excellence begins with clarity of the vision of what it will precisely look like when you get there, including what performance (cultural and injury prevention) would be observed when the vision became reality. Only by following this can an organization effectively and proactively begin to prioritize the steps it will take to achieve success, validated by measurements indicating what it wants is increasing in visibility.

Great leaders, inspiring discretionary effort, create cultures motivated by achieving and measuring success rather than solely avoiding failure. Beginning each year with a goal of zero injuries without also including desirable performance improvement (e.g., measurements that validate performance improvement due to proactive activities) sends the message, "I want you to work harder this year to fail less!" No organization is motivated to excellence with this. Yet, unfortunately, in most safety management systems, this persists.

About the Author

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