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The Alternative to Management by Exception

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Rather than seeking out failures and poor performers, isn't it better to seek out successes and best performers and build on their models and successes?

Historically, safety has been managed by exception. When something or someone becomes the exception to what we want, THAT is what gets addressed.

Accidents create the data points to which companies react, and the person caught taking the risk gets the most attention from the supervisor. Rule breakers get punished while rule followers largely are ignored. Safety metrics generally are the frequency, severity and costs of safety failures, such as recordable rates, severity rates, workers' compensation offsets, etc. The goals set for improvement become how to fail less rather than how to succeed. In fact, success becomes defined as the absence or reduction of failure.

Management by exception has been around for a long time and has a logic to it. It has its share of success stories and cannot be dismissed as ineffective.

However, there is an alternative approach to management that finally is making its way into safety. It has been used in other management applications and has often proven to be more effective. It is used by sports teams, entertainers and even a few forward-thinking businesses.

Unlike management by exception, which seeks out the failures and lowest performers and attempts to make them less bad, this form of management seeks out the successes and best performers and seeks to build on their models and successes. It uses these models to create an image of what success looks like and how excellence can be accomplished. It truly works toward success rather than away from failure. It also tends to produce higher levels of excellence than management by exception.

Strategic and Proactive

Such an approach is strategic and proactive. Think about a game plan for a major sporting event. Such a plan seldom focuses on keeping the weakest players from making mistakes. Rather, it focuses on how to best use the star players to strategic advantage. These star players are team captains and their example and mentoring helps lesser players improve their performance and morale.

The goal of the game plan is to win. Every player has a role to play and teamwork is key. Certainly, errors and turnovers impact the game and are

avoided when possible, but the real contributions to victory lead to naming the MVP (most valuable player). Even if you are not MVP, your team won and it is a team victory. Even though there is no such designation, management by exception tends to focus on the LVP (least valuable player) and ignores those who are winning the game against accidents.

But sports are not the only arena in which the stars are the focus. The best actors and actresses tend to get the leading roles. The best producers and directors tend to get the best scripts. Movie-goers are drawn by movies produced by and starring their favorites. Orchestras put the best musician in the first chair. The best ballerinas are prima ballerinas and the best chefs are master chefs.

Businesses attract clients and customers by putting their stars on display, not just by trying to correct their employee who just made a mistake. There are a few organizations that recognize or reward safety champions, but the majority persist in focusing on the failures rather than the stars.

In the history of quality-improvement efforts, there was a parallel to management by exception called quality through inspection. The basic approach was to have some form of final inspection of products being manufactured to catch and remove any defective units before they were sent out to customers or for distribution. This prevented customers from getting defective products, but it did not improve the ratio of good to defective products being produced. It also put the focus on the defect rather than the successful product. The goal became to produce fewer defects rather than more perfect products. When companies turned their attention to also include what made the perfect products, they began to define success rather than simply the lack of failure. They also began to state their ratios as percent perfect rather than percent defective. Such terms as Six Sigma were born, and workers began to strive for the new models of success.

Companies found that working toward a positive goal rather than away from a negative outcome had advantages. It tended to provide more motivation for workers to excel. Positive goals could be supported through friendly methods such as positive reinforcement and coaching. Both of these tend to build strong relationships and cultures. Focusing on positive role models rather than negative ones also was more motivating. Workers generally put more effort into trying to succeed and follow their champions than they did in trying not to follow those who failed. Positive efforts also minimized avoidance behaviors associated with trying to not get caught rather than trying to honestly improve.

Not every organization that tried to build on their safety strengths had success. But the ones who did won big! They reported not only greatly improved lagging indicators but even more dynamic improvement of safety culture and motivation. They sensed stronger teamwork and cooperation, and more positive attitudes. Workers more freely offered suggestions for improvements, and the quality of their suggestions grew as they experienced successes. In safety, as in other areas of performance, building on strengths often can be more effective than correcting weaknesses.

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