The Customers of Safety

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More and more, organizations are realizing that workers are not a safety problem to be controlled, but the customers of their safety efforts. When the needs of the customer are not met, tragedies become possible.

April 28th was a national day of mourning in Canada for those who have been killed on the job. The promotional posters read: "Reflect, Remember, Resolve, Prevent." At 11 a.m., all participants observed a moment of silence for those who lost their lives and their families that were left behind. At the organizational safety conference in St. John, New Brunswick, they showed a video depicting the story of one man who was seriously injured on the job and how the owner of the company realized he had not done all he could to prevent the incident. The video had a genuine tone of regret, but no clear call to action other than to try harder.

More and more, organizations are realizing that workers are not a safety problem to be controlled, but the customers of their safety efforts. When the needs of the customer are not met, tragedies become possible. Still, many organizations base their efforts on required, regulatory restrictions and minimizing legal exposure rather than on the needs of the workers.

Tragedies such as catastrophic injuries and fatalities continue to be the wakeup call that communicates workers don't have all they need to do their jobs safely. In many cases, reactive safety still tends to produce more effective safety efforts than proactive efforts. Organizations turn the crank on the box of traditional safety programs even after the music has ceased to play.

Do the Research

So, how do we get out of this mindset and meet the safety needs of workers? The answer lies in adopting some marketing and market research practices for safety efforts. Products and services often are developed to meet a consumer need. Market research has been done to determine what the need is and if the proposed product or service will meet the need.

We need to do such research among workers in safety. They should to be asked what they need to do their job safely in terms of training, assistance, tools and equipment, procedures and, most importantly, time. Regular tabulations of workers' perceptions of need should direct the efforts of the safety department as well as feed valuable information to training, procurement, engineering and supervision. The increased percentage of worker needs met should become a KPI for the safety department that is reported to management and leadership along with lagging indicators.

Realizing that workers may not know what they need, the organization should use outside expertise and benchmarking to determine what other things might improve safety that workers are not aware of. In marketing, "Blue Ocean" refers to new products and services that create whole new markets. Steve Jobs said, "No one knew they needed an iPhone until I invented one."

There may be any number of innovations in safety that could benefit workers in particular organizations. Savvy organizations have explorers with an "ear to the ground" through safety publications, trade shows, new product announcements and other media who include organizational leaders as well as safety professionals. These groups of explorers are on the lookout for anything that potentially could help their workers do their jobs more safely.

However, it seldom is sufficient to simply measure the market and respond. The true meeting of needs should be strategic, not just tactical. This means that safety market research should be shared with organizational leaders who compile the data into a strategy for safety that matches and compliments the business strategy.

The safety strategy clearly should define the plan for winning the war against accidents by arming the workers with the best equipment and a clear battle plan. Progress periodically needs to be measured and the strategy adjusted when needed. If the business strategy competes with, rather than compliments, the safety strategy, safety almost surely will lose the battle. Safety and productivity should not become dichotomous for workers. The ideas of safety and productivity should meet in an overarching strategy to achieve "safe production" of products and/or services. When the battle plan is clear, the effort of everyone involved is aligned and effective.

Limitations

Such a strategic approach to safety creates some limitations as well. Off-the-shelf programs, processes and training modules often are insufficient to meet needs and create alignment with strategy. More customization may be needed, which may challenge existing approaches to training and worker engagement.

Computer-based training (CBT) modules used for annual refresher training may need to be modified. Classroom training may need to be better aligned, and the use of outside training companies may not work as well. However, while these are challenges, they also are opportunities. In reality, most safety training, especially CBTs, don't meet worker needs and largely are a waste of time other than to meet minimal compliance requirements.

The workers already are taking time for these activities. The cost of worker time away from work usually is greater than the cost of delivering the training through various media. Making the training modules more effective in meeting worker needs ultimately is a low-cost approach with a great potential ROI based on accident reduction.

Worker engagement opportunities, such as behavior-based safety (BBS) observations and steering teams, also may need to be assessed against the safety strategy. While engagement is a noble goal, many such programs are viewed by workers as unnecessary and unproductive busy work, and can actually create resentment rather than engagement. This is not true of all such programs.

Many BBS and other processes are viewed by workers as extremely valuable in accident prevention and should be continued. Others may need some revisions. But, again, the determining factor should be whether or not the programs are meeting the needs of workers and helping them do their jobs more safely.

When organizational leaders and safety managers realize that the true challenge is not compliance or legal exposure, but meeting the needs of the workers through effective safety efforts, it may be possible for the Canadians to quit mourning, and the world to quit regretting, and for everyone to take safety to a new level of excellence.

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