



The Rationale for Safety Excellence

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Asking the right questions of business leaders often leads to strategic thinking that uncovers the rationale for pursuing safety excellence.

If an organization is pretty good at safety, why spend time and resources getting even better? Wouldn't that effort be better directed at other aspects of business? Asking questions like these of business leaders often leads to deeper strategic thinking that can uncover the true rationale for pursuing safety excellence. Such rationale often is the key to getting the level of employee engagement necessary to make excellence happen.

Many senior leaders believe safety is important and feel that delving into the rationale for it is an exercise in the obvious. Few feel that way after they have thoroughly examined their personal and organizational reasons for pursuing safety excellence. Such an examination often brings to light even more potential benefits to justify the pursuit. A well-rounded explanation of the rationale is the beginning of a true safety-excellence strategy. Organizations that achieve true and sustainable safety excellence almost always do so strategically. The more common approach of defining goals and trying to reach them programmatically has proven to be self-limiting and seldom results in the desired level of safety performance.

The first level of rationale should be business-related. Safety has measurable costs, both to operate its functions and to pay for its failures. However, leaders often find that the real rationale centers on the hidden costs of accidents rather than the visible ones. The absence of key personnel on projects or in customer relations or acquisitions can be devastating to some organizations. The disruption of continuous operations to deal with accidents and investigate them affects many others.

Some industries actually ban suppliers and contractors from bidding projects if their accident rates or severity get too high. Some organizations have found it almost impossible to attract and hire the kind of talent they wanted because of the negative publicity they've received on past accidents.

Safety and Business Management

Failure to produce good safety results reflects negatively on almost all organizations in one way or another. All senior managers interviewed in a recent study stated that they view an organization's safety performance as an indicator of their overall business management practices and they hesitate to do any kind of business with organizations that have poor safety records. The controlling of unnecessary expense and the avoidance of bad press and strained business relationships make a compelling case for the pursuit of safety excellence. But most organizations that reach safety excellence do so by achieving a goal, rather than by avoiding failure. They simply want to belong to the ranks of the best organizations in their fields and justify their efforts through this desire.

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Some of the most compelling reasons for pursuing safety excellence aren't solely business reasons. The very fact that we're all human beings and care about other human beings is a strong rationale for safety excellence.

Seeing what can and has happened to people in industrial accidents is heart-wrenching and tends to bring out the altruism in fellow workers and leaders. A call to action that uses such rationale tends to reach the hearts as well as the minds. Since human beings react emotionally before they react intellectually, this can be a very powerful approach to increase engagement.

Psychologists tell us that two of the most basic human needs are affinity and affiliation: the need to believe in something and to belong to something. An organizational effort to reach safety excellence can affect both of these needs for workers to some extent. To believe in safety excellence and to belong to a team with a strategy and united effort to reach it can be fulfilling and even motivational. Most organizations that have reached the highest levels of excellence in safety report that their workers gave them almost superhuman effort along the way. Ordinary causes and rationale don't solicit extraordinary effort. Without extraordinary effort, most safety programs only produce average-to-poor safety performance.

Safety experts and motivational practitioners have suggested that telling workers the altruistic reasons for safety – and omitting the business reasons – will produce better results. Certainly, if the only reason for pursuing safety excellence is to save the organization money or give leaders bigger bonuses, that rationale likely won't motivate high levels of engagement and motivation within the rank-and-file. However, presenting the whole case for safety excellence – business and altruistic rationale together – has been quite successful for many organizations. Stating the case that safety excellence makes us better people and makes our business better can be compelling. It's the right thing to do and it also is good business.

What's in it for Us?

This holistic rationale for safety excellence goes a long ways toward answering the proverbial "What's in it for me?" question. Knowing that the pursuit is both human and business-oriented tends to make sense when you're part of an organizational team. Team members who feel vulnerable to accidents gain a greater sense that everyone is looking out for their wellbeing. Those who feel in control of their workplace risks have the opportunity to look out for others and possibly share their expertise. Everyone can become a better person and a better team player. The "What's in it for me?" begins to evolve to a "What's in it for us?" posture. Safety becomes more cultural and less programmatic.

Organizations tend to set accident-reduction goals and dash out to do war with accidents. True excellence begins with defining the objectives and benefits before drafting a battle plan. Hearts are won with rationale, not action plans. The benefits of taking the time to bring organizational leaders together to define the rationale for safety excellence are the winning of these hearts and the extraordinary effort that can follow. Clearly defining the rationale also creates the vision of what success will look like and keeps the efforts on track. The right rationale and vision lead to the right strategy and end the self-limiting cycle of goals and programs that keep most organizations from reaching the elusive status of safety excellence.

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