When Organizations Outgrow Their Safety Programs

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Whether your organization is growing internally or through mergers or acquisitions, shifting direction or simply experiencing the world-wide change of generations, you might be outgrowing your current safety capacity.

Many safety programs have become stagnant during a period of relatively good results and have dulled their sense of vulnerability. The need for strategic change in safety is ambushing many organizations in today's climate. The best time to make adjustments is before your current programs create the possibility for catastrophic accidents.

Many organizations have enjoyed the luxury of experienced workforces over the past two or three decades. These well-seasoned workers have developed a keen awareness of workplace dangers and often have developed a culture of looking out for each other. New workers could be introduced into this culture with relatively little onboarding and be assimilated quickly and safely.

Certainly, some bad practices get passed along in such a system, but the good usually outweighs the bad. In such a reality, training and onboarding often atrophy and become ineffective. The outcomes don't point to the deficiencies because the culture prevents the negative consequences of weak formal training by providing good on-the-job training and a support system of experienced fellow workers.

But what happens when the experienced workforce is diluted with too many new hires, or the most experienced workers begin to retire in large numbers? New employees often get thrown into the workplace with inadequate training and weak, or lacking, support systems. Safety professionals find they need to spend much more time in the workplace to correct performance problems. When they can no longer manage critical safety issues with the inexperienced masses, accident rates begin to climb and the safety staff goes into fire-fighting mode reacting to accidents. Accident investigations take an increasingly large percentage of the safety staff's time. Corrective actions also begin to take longer and the remaining time often is confiscated by organizational leaders who begin to question why the failure rate is growing.

Many organizations fail to realize in a timely manner that changing workforces require changing safety efforts. When the realization finally comes, the reaction often is simply to do more rather than to address the problem strategically. New programs are initiated with little regard to how they fit in with existing programs and with few metrics to truly test their effectiveness or efficiency.

This programmatic approach has created a marketplace for safety programs. Almost every consultant and training company can provide something more for organizations to do and price them according to the urgency to improve results. Ironically, most of these programs produce Hawthorne Effect results, which make them look good in the short-term. When an organization adopts a new program and the lagging indicators respond in a timely manner, leaders often declare the problem solved and move on to other priorities. Unfortunately, a programmatic approach to safety almost always fails in the long run.

Vision Statement

The alternative to this approach is to re-think the overall safety strategy. It is ironic that organizations that have a strategic approach to almost every aspect of business don't all have a true safety strategy. Strategy begins with a view of what desired success looks like. Some call this a vision statement.

It is important to envision the organization's personal best rather than some abstract view of perfection. Many vision statements are so perfectionistic they actually demotivate workers. It also is critical to define success in terms of performance, not just results. Remember that "Zero Accidents" and "Everyone Goes Home Safe" are goals and not strategies. What performance will produce those results, and how can you repeat it next year?

Once strategic thinking begins, old paradigms and heritage practices don't necessarily dominate the approach to success. Strategic thinking opens new possibilities that programmatic thinking tends to ignore. Who should set the safety strategy? Who should make it happen in the workplace? What training will be necessary? What criteria should be used to screen candidates for new positions? What communication will create focus? What metrics will give workers motivational insight into successful performance? What kind of safety leadership and management is needed, and should it be embedded into the organization or be a separate, stand-alone department? What kind of safety culture will sustain the desired performance long-term? What kind of engagement opportunities do workers need to form this desired culture?

Once a strategy begins to emerge, it may be necessary to assess the current status of the safety culture and determine what factors influence it. Many argue that assessments should precede strategy development, but often an assessment identifies problem areas, causing the strategy sessions to digress into problem-solving sessions (gap closure) rather than true strategy development. When strategy comes first, it more often defines success rather than just avoids failure. Such strategies tend to be proactive and preventative, rather than simply reactionary.

Once the strategy is determined and the current status assessed, it may be time to look for programs that were avoided earlier. Now programs can be fit into the strategic framework rather than simply aiming new efforts at old problems. Many organizations find that refining existing programs is more effective than adopting new ones. Always remember to manage the perception of change and not overwhelm the workforce. A modification of an existing program can appear less daunting than starting over with something new. Even new programs can be postured as the next logical step in a progression rather than a new start from a dead end.

Leaders always should be in touch with the evolution of their organizations and realize changes in the workforce necessitate changes in safety efforts. Leaders who stay in touch and avoid the "more is better" mentality tend to think about safety strategically. Strategy is the purview of leaders and they should take the lead in safety, as they do in any key priority or value in the organization. Such strategies utilize help from safety professionals without delegating safety entirely.

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