



# Why safety competes with production, and what to do about it

**S**afety, quality and production are competing priorities in most organizations. Rather than more company messaging, first focus on the experiences of the workforce to change perceptions. Today more than ever, corporations work aggressively to change how safety is perceived and valued within day-to-day decisions. “Safety first,” “safe production,” “safety is a value,” “safety is a way of life” and “there is no job so important we can’t do it safely” are phrases messaged throughout countless companies all with good intent to influence employee actions, but they never fully do the job.

Values are created within an organizational culture when specific beliefs are reinforced at or near the point of decision. What follows is a model taught to clients, outlining how cultures are formed and how they influence new members. Individuals join a company with existing perceptions about safety. Perhaps their last place of employment was very mature in safety thinking, or perhaps not. These perceptions create attitudes about the importance of safety.

Attitudes, in turn, lead to the creation of values both within the person and within the work group. These values shape the decisions an individual will make when presented with the opportunity to, for example, stop production or a task because of a safety concern. Before carrying out these decisions and behaving in a specific manner, the individual has an expectation of the experience that will follow the action. If the outcome is in line with the expectation, the workers will not make a big deal out of it, nor talk about it, because it is what was expected.

However, if a greatly unexpected experience occurs — like how the supervisor or manager responds — some storytelling to peers might occur. Unfortunately, the more negative the experience, the louder the stories that either confirm or conflict with the individual’s perception. The stories are more significant and influential than the messaging of the corporation that safety is just as or more important than production. Individuals within a culture are actively on the lookout for examples (i.e., experiences, stories) that

confirm or conflict with the stated priorities or values.

Hundreds of consulting projects have yielded many examples of company leaders actually demonstrating safety is either a top priority or at the same level as production. Unfortunately, most of the time the leaders are more aware of these stories than those that should be influenced by them. Perceptions may not truly be reality, but they are for those holding them. If the perceptions are accurate but undesired, change the issue creating them. If they are inaccurate, you must change the perception.

To begin changing perceptions, begin with identifying what experiences and stories are generating them. You can’t force an epiphany; it takes a change in information and experiences to allow for beliefs to change on their own. Although this often begins with changing the information, real progress occurs with changing the experiences and storytelling. As you accomplish this, listen to the storytelling. Who has the loudest voice — the naysayer reminding others of the past, or individuals with newer,

better and more accurate stories to tell?

If you are not actively managing the marketing and experiences of beliefs that should become values within your organization, others will be, and you may not like what they keep reminding others. A graphic outlining the model described within this article can be accessed by contacting the author.

*Shawn M. Galloway is the president of ProAct Safety and co-author of several bestselling books. As a consultant, adviser and keynote speaker, he has helped hundreds of organizations within every major industry internationally achieve and sustain excellence in performance and culture. He is also the host of the highly acclaimed weekly podcast series Safety Culture Excellence®.*

*Galloway is now a member of BIC Media Solutions’ speakers bureau. For more information about BIC Media Solutions’ speakers bureau, contact Earl Heard at earlheard@bicalliance.com or call (800) 460-4242.*

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