By: SHAWN M. GALLOWAY
President
ProAct Safety

This shouldn't be a provocative question

At an international conference in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, for one of the industries most advanced in safety, I submitted a question through the conference app for the panel of senior executives from a few of the top-performing companies. I asked, "What do you do to ensure the safety strategy doesn't compete with the business strategy?" The moderator chose that as the final question because he felt "it was a provocative question."

Harvard Professor Michael Porter posits, "Strategy is the creation of a unique and valuable position. It requires you to make trade-offs to choose what not to do. It involves creating 'fit' among a company's activities." How well do your safety and business efforts fit, and not compete, with each other? Consider the importance of some of the following real questions overheard in client engagements:

"If we are going to acquire this organization and it has horrendous safety performance, how does that match with our continuous communication that safety is a core value?" "Is the financial return from this acquisition of greater importance than what we are trying to accomplish with our safety culture?" "If we plan to grow organically by 25 percent this year to meet market conditions or expectations of shareholders, but our onboarding capabilities aren't robust enough to mitigate the risk of so many new people in operations, how do we manage this?" "We need to increase production yield by 15 percent with our current resources, and we are already understaffed in safety and training. How will we control the risks and perception that production is of more importance than safety?" "We want supervisors to spend more time on the floor coaching for both mandatory and discretionary behavior, and we have overloaded them with paperwork to be filled out for quality, delivery, cost and production. How can we address this conflict in expectations?"

Executives at the conference discussed my question in a similar fashion to how we coach our clients, and many examples were shared. Safety strategy is not separate from the business strategy; it is a significant part of it. Efforts to improve safety performance and culture have their own plan, including a clear vision of what success looks like, their own strategic thrusts, initiatives that support the thrusts with documented responsibilities for all (so they see their specific roles in executing the strategy), and key measurements that validate the efficacy of the plan and ensure that progress is going in a sustainable direction. All of this is then connected to the business growth thrusts, and the balanced safety scorecard is a part of the dashboard that has visibility all the way to the level of the board of directors.

To make business choices, care is taken to discuss the impact on other operational improvement plans like safety. Similarly, when the safety plan is built out over three or five years, those choices are considered and the impact on meeting other business targets is discussed. If you want safety to be viewed as the way you conduct your business, holding it truly as a core rather than a situational value, it needs to be part of and led by the business leaders. You can't delegate values.

What you do to ensure the safety strategy doesn't compete with business strategy shouldn't be viewed as a provocative question. It should be a common question every organization on the path toward excellence asks, from the most senior to the first-line leaders.

If you want safety to be viewed as the way you conduct your business, it needs to be part of and led by the business leaders.

Shawn M. Galloway is the president of ProAct Safety and co-author of several best-selling books. As a consultant, adviser and keynote speaker, he has helped hundreds of organizations within every major industry to improve safety strategy, culture, leadership and engagement. He is also the host of the highly acclaimed weekly podcast series Safety Culture Excellence®.

For more information, call (936) 273-8700 or email info@ProActSafety.com.