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Safety efforts approaching 'stall speed'

After you define what safety excellence looks like in terms of both performance and results within your company, what is the level of effort necessary to achieve it and remain there? If what we define as excellence in safety performance and safety culture evolves over time, as it should, then doesn't that level of effort become not enough, stall your progress and possibly begin your decline? You are either approaching new heights or falling backward. As change is the only constant in business, there is no stasis in safety.

Safety is complex and tragedies occur even with great leaders who have honorable intentions.

The heavier an aircraft, the greater the speed necessary to achieve flight. In order to maintain flight, the slowest speed necessary is listed within the operating manual of each aircraft. This is called "stall speed" and is used to predict stall conditions. This is calculated by taking into consideration the airplane's altitude, acceleration and other factors. How do you predict your safety performance stall conditions? Do you know your safety effort stall speed? What measurements, metrics and indicators are you paying attention to?

Safety is not easy. If it was, all companies would be injury-free — or at least the ones truly dedicated to the pursuit of safety excellence. While writing this from my home in Houston, the news alerted me that a construction company headquartered here with "one of the best safety records in the construction industry," according to its website, tragically experienced a partial building collapse within the new Marathon Oil headquarters. The collapse left three workers fatally injured. Safety is complex, and tragedies occur even with great leaders who have honorable intentions.

All companies are unique with their own distinctive cultures, current position in safety maturity, logistics, business realities and market influences. They also have their own competitive advantages and disadvantages. Some have better span of control and influence than others. Many have operationalized safety execution within line leadership, while others require the constant presence of a safety professional to influence decision making. Obviously, what works in one company to achieve excellence in safety performance and safety culture is more than necessary in some enterprises, while not enough in others. There is no one-size-fits-all approach with regard to safety efforts.

Approaches to improving safety should be made to fit all these realities rather than making the unique businesses shape themselves to fit safety improvement tools and methodologies. This requires paying attention to the true correlation between safety effort and results. What is truly adding sustainable value? What effort is not enough? What effort is not perceived as value-added and is instead viewed as "too much" or over-controlling by the critical contributors to the results?

Which measurements tell you, with confidence, a safe environment has been created with the many complex risks and hazards eliminated or controlled? What metrics communicate that your culture has the desired beliefs, competencies, behaviors and knowledge? Have they become common and are the correct experiences and stories reinforcing them? What indicators provide insight into the efficacy of your unique safety efforts to shape all of this? How are you determining if you are approaching stall conditions prior to experiencing it? As you mature in your safety performance and culture, so should your measurements, metrics and indicators. Otherwise, you will be surprised when you start to experience stall conditions.

Shawn M. Galloway is the president of ProAct Safety and co-author of several bestselling books. As an award-winning consultant, adviser, leadership coach 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 Safety Culture Excellence®, a highly acclaimed weekly podcast series.

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