

SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT SAFETY EFFORTS

Great safety efforts don't focus on best practices, but instead continuously look for better practices.

After 28+ years of heading ProAct Safety, and a corporate career prior to that, I have some institutional knowledge of safety practices that might be helpful or even diagnostic for your own safety efforts. No generalization is universally true, including these, but there are patterns that emerge after being exposed to hundreds of organizations, leaders, managers and programs.

I have heard that experience is what helps you to recognize a mistake when you are making it again, and I have seen these mistakes multiple times. After exposing these potential flaws, I will also point out some examples of excellence I have encountered along the way.

Observation #1: Most safety leaders don't lead safety.

My good friend and fellow pursuer of safety excellence, Earl Blair, wrote an article for *Professional Safety Journal* titled, "Great Leaders Do Not Solve Problems." By that very definition, most safety leaders are not "great." Of course, Earl was pointing out that great leaders get ahead of safety issues rather than waiting to get ambushed by them. Few of the safety leaders I have consulted with actually do that, and some who try to do so fail.

National Safety Council gives an award called CEOs Who 'Get It.' They are talking about leaders who have a deep enough understanding of safety to do a great job leading it. Most safety leaders will not get that award.

Observation #2: People don't know what they don't know.

A frustrated client once pointed out to me that she had administered an expensive perception survey to her entire workforce, and the results were not conclusive. One of the perceptions measured was stated as, "I have everything I need to perform my job safely." Workers were asked to agree or disagree with this statement. The vast majority agreed, yet the safety manager was aware of numerous deficits in training and safety equipment that she wanted to address. The survey was not supporting her agenda.

The problem is that people don't know what is missing. Perceptions are not necessarily reality; they are merely how people perceive real-



ity, and their perceptions are only based on the knowledge they possess. When you ask people what they don't know, they can only base their answer on their own limited knowledge.

Observation #3: Most safety training sucks.

I don't think this observation needs a lot of elaboration for most safety professionals. Most organizations have followed the path of least resistance in required refresher training, opting for mind-numbing computer-based training (CBT) and abandoning hands-on training. Meanwhile, new employee orientation is often like drinking from a fire hose with entirely too much information to absorb, much less remember.

I have preached the principle that if you can't get it in their heads, you won't get it in their habits. Most safety information is not readily available in the heads of workers even after they are "trained."

Observation #4: Most safety metrics are hopelessly reactive.

The realization that measuring accident rates and severity is descriptive but not predictive is finally becoming apparent. In reaction to this realization, many organizations are actively seeking to find what they are calling leading indicators. While this is taking them from one-dimensional thinking to two-dimensional thinking, the fact remains that the world is a three-dimensional place. Most of what are being called leading indicators are simply measures of safety activities or efforts.

Activities do not directly impact results. Effective safety activities improve competence and culture. Competence and culture improve performance. Performance improves results. Organizations need to develop a balanced



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scorecard for safety and measure at each of these stages to truly understand how to improve safety. This is what W. Edwards Deming called “profound knowledge” of a process.

If you think of safety as a linear cause-and-effect model, you are missing the point. Safety is a process that involves multiple stages of progress, and if you don’t have metrics along the way, you will not see where your successes or failures are occurring.

Observation #5: Safety excellence is often elusive.

Trying to drive all the variation out of safety efforts is a daunting task. Most workplaces are changing in one way or another: new employees, new processes, new products or services, and new management or supervision. And if the workplace is not offering enough change, the world away from work is.

Many organizations struggled to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic and then struggled to get back to normal and are now struggling to adapt to the new surge. Home lives have been radically changed for many by these and other events.

The pursuit of safety excellence is a process, not an event. It is a continuously moving target, and organizations that achieve and maintain excellent safety performance are dynamic. They have learned to assess changes and develop new game plans regularly. They realize that the same thinking and actions that got them excellence last year or last month might not be sufficient anymore. As Marshall Goldsmith pointed out, “What got you here won’t get you there.”

Great safety efforts recognize success because of some of their actions and in spite of others. Just because a strategy is working doesn’t mean it is perfect or that it will continue working. Great safety efforts don’t focus on “best practices.” They continuously look for “better practices,” knowing that no best is ever so good you can’t conceive a better one.

Those pursuing safety excellence often benefit from observing others who have attained excellence, but never by simply imitating them. Every organization—and even every site within an organization—is unique and needs to focus on its individuality as well as its goals.

All progress begins with thinking differently. I know that these musings will not instruct or prescribe how you or your organization can achieve safety excellence. Instead, they are offered to help you break out of current patterns of thinking and open up to new possibilities. If you think you have all the answers, ask yourself how that is working for you. When you open your mind, there is almost always a better way. **EHS**

Terry L. Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over. He is retiring and will be succeeded by Shawn Galloway, president of ProAct Safety. Terry will continue to write and speak on safety topics and share his years of experience through this column. Shawn can be reached at info@proactsafety.com or (800) 395-1347.

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