Five Core Capacities for Sustainable Safety Excellence

By Shawn M. Galloway

Leadership

Engagement

Cultural

Strategic

System

oes your organization have the capacity to achieve sustainable excellence in safety performance and culture?

For excellence to become a reality in any important area of operations, especially safety, there are five vital capacities that organizations must develop, monitor and synergize to adapt and thrive in a fast-paced and ever-changing world: system, leadership, engagement, cultural and strategic. Based on extensive cross-industry research and decades of experience leading change in all major industries, this article introduces the model titled "Five Core Capacities for Sustainable Safety Excellence."

System Capacity to Prevent and Recover

For a long time, safety efforts primarily focused on preventing unwanted events and gave little room for what happens if things do not go according to plan. To mitigate hazards and risks that might be faced in the performance of work, a hierarchy of controls (elimination, substitution, engineering controls, administrative controls and personal protective equipment) is deployed. Despite these prevention systems and a strong culture, work doesn't always go according to plan. How work is planned is often different than how work is done.

Every day, there are deviations from expectations in performance and results, and humans are fallible. Mistakes should be expected to occur in complex environments. Knowing and preparing for this, those organizations pursuing safety excellence create the capacity to prevent unwanted outcomes as well as the capacity to recover when deviations and mistakes occur, minimizing the resulting severity and/or bringing the operations back to the pre-event state.
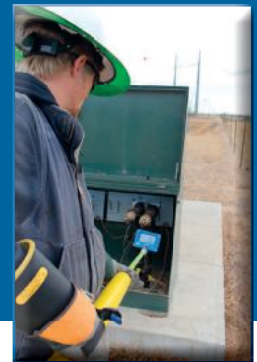
Leadership Capacity

Organizations focused on safety excellence invest in their people leaders at all

For excellence to become a reality, these capacities must be developed, monitored and synergized.

levels, especially on the front line. This is done to develop and continuously improve their competency and confidence in aligning their teams and crews with the occupational and safety culture and the systems necessary to prevent and recover from unwanted events. These leaders work to align performance and results expectations and, through a coaching leadership style, regularly monitor work performance and embrace their responsibility to help remove obstacles and barriers to success.

To create a learning organization, these leaders intentionally create psychological safety with their team, allowing for observations and conversations that yield an understanding of error traps and what might produce an error-likely situation. With this insight, they proactively seek opportunities to learn from a deviation from expectations before they produce incident, damage or injury.

Engagement Capacity

Engagement is the desire to perform that workers bring with them each day. It's their attitude toward their work, peers, boss or bosses, the organization, the objective at hand and so forth. Stripped to its essence, true engagement is intrinsic motivation, an individual's desire to complete the work to the best of one's ability and feel proud of what they, their fellow workers and the organization are accomplishing. Positive engagement moves from buy-in to willing participation to self-ownership, finally arriving at shared ownership, the highest form of engagement.

On the journey to safety excellence, leaders building this capacity monitor what might either demotivate or motivate their people. Decisions are made against the question, "Will this further or hinder our efforts to create real engagement?" Rather than pursuing extrinsic motivators like incentives or threats, these leaders work to improve their management systems and the employee experience, yielding a constant improvement in observed discretionary effort.

Cultural Capacity

Culture can be defined as the common beliefs that govern common behaviors. It is more than "the way we do things around here." It is also the why. Safety culture (beliefs, behaviors and experiences specific to safety) is just an aspect of occupational culture. That said, everyone has a safety culture, although perhaps not the one they desire. Leaders developing a culture of excellence are intentional about the culture they pursue. A vision of safety excellence is created that includes the most important beliefs and behaviors that would be common when their ideal culture is achieved.

What people do when the boss is not around is an aspect of every occupational culture, as are the experiences new employees have after hiring and onboarding. These leaders work to acclimate new members

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to the desired written and unwritten rules and desired beliefs, behaviors, experiences and stories; the tribe members look out for each other, regardless of tenure or title. Leaders also recognize employees must have experiences that are desirable beyond safety exchanges. A holistic approach is undertaken, focusing on the broader occupational culture, and the strategy to achieve safety excellence becomes intertwined with the overall strategy for the trajectory of the business.

Strategic Capacity

Strategy is a framework of choices, trade-offs or small bets an organization makes to determine how to capture and deliver sustainable value. A strategy to pursue excellence focuses on enabling and achieving repeatable success, not just avoiding failures like many traditional safety efforts. Whenever I find a lack of engagement from the workforce or a lack of investment (sufficient time, capital, resources, energy) applied by leaders to improve safety, I almost always find it comes from not seeing the value in doing more than what is currently in place. Perceived value is the most significant factor in success or failure when working to improve performance and culture. Being strategic means focusing on the right thing and ensuring the perception of the value of your efforts among participants or investors.

Operational leadership also understands the need for and complexity of creating the organization's capacity for achieving overall equipment effectiveness, operational reliability or overall production reliability, and they recognize safety must be a part of achieving these, not a separate function or strategy. With this capacity, the occupational safety strategy becomes part of the overall business strategy, and business decisions are made in support of the vision of safety excellence and safety strategy. They no longer conflict. Accountability is increased as the actions to improve safety performance, systems, leadership, engagement and culture are operationalized throughout line leadership.

Building Capacity

Building the five core capacities for safety excellence avoids the misalignment that often exists between operational and safety leadership and between management and the workforce on the goals of safety;

how excellence is defined, measured and achieved; who is responsible for the journey; and the path that will be taken.

Review this model and score 1-5 (1 = no confidence, 3 = halfway there, and 5 = complete confidence):
- What is your confidence level in your system's capacity to prevent events and recover when deviations like mistakes occur?
- How confident are you that your leaders align cultures and systems and proactively learn from deviations?
- Does your organization have complete engagement capacity to tap into vital discretionary effort by creating a sense of shared ownership for what is necessary to create sustainable excellence in safety?
- How confident are you in your cultural capacity to align each current and incoming tribe member, regardless of tenure or title?
- Do you have the strategic capacity to accomplish business results, and do you have initiatives focused on ensuring the creation of the previous four capacities?

All five of these capacities are necessary, and no one has an endless budget. If you were to rank them in order of importance to improve, which would make the greatest difference in your organization if focused on first? Consider sharing this model with others in your group and asking them to provide you with their perspectives. This is a crucial first step in building these five core capacities, vital for the pursuit of sustainable safety excellence. iP

About the Author: *Shawn M. Galloway is CEO of ProAct Safety (https://proactsafety.com) and an author of several bestselling books, including his latest, "Bridge to Excellence: Building Capacity for Sustainable Performance." As an award-winning consultant, trusted adviser, leadership coach and keynote speaker, he has helped hundreds of organizations within every primary industry to pursue and sustain safety excellence. Galloway also hosts the highly acclaimed weekly podcast series "Safety Culture Excellence."*