

Assessment: The Second Element of Safety Excellence

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Strategy defines the ending point of your road to safety excellence through the creation of a vision of success, and assessment determines the starting point by specifically determining the current status.

Last month's column suggested strategy as the first element of safety excellence. Many argue that assessment should precede strategy, but experience has suggested that a strategy based on assessment rather than strategic vision tends to be a gap filler rather than a true strategy.

That said, it is critical to determine the current status in order to map the road to excellence. Determining the shortest distance between two points requires determining the exact location of those two points. Strategy defines the ending point through the creation of a vision of success, and assessment determines the starting point by specifically determining the current status.

If a safety strategy includes improving safety culture, an assessment should include measuring key cultural elements. Unfortunately, many leaders have been convinced that a simple perception survey is a sufficient metric for culture. It is not! While perceptions are an important artifact of culture, they are by no means a complete description.

Also, most perception measurement tools are fraught with potential problems that can skew the data. Among these problems are the following:

Administration – If participants are asked to fill out a paper survey or sit at a computer to respond, several factors come into play. If participants are not given sufficient time to complete the questions or are being watched or checked up on by supervisors or are not convinced that their completed forms are confidential, they may be guarded in their responses.

Timing – If perceptions are measured near in time to other events such as downsizings, union contract negotiations, significant disciplinary actions or announcements of new policies and procedures, these factors can skew the perceptions being measured.

Terminology – Many off-the-shelf perception surveys have generic language that cannot be changed. For example, if the form asks about "supervisors" when workers use terms such as "foremen" or "team leads," it may cause a degree of confusion that can impact results.

Specific Programs – Generic surveys don't allow the inclusion of information about specific or new programs that may be important to safety efforts. Knowing how workers perceive these programs can be important information that is missed.

Benchmarking – Some surveys statistically validate their results with other responders in the same industry and with a similar level of maturity in safety programs and results, but many simply report how the organization's responses compared to everyone else who completed the survey. Percentage or quartile rankings are meaningless when compared to undefined groups.

Perceptions Versus Reality

Even if you avoid these common problems by measuring perceptions, you will not know the accuracy of the perceptions from a survey alone. Whoever said that perception is reality had a very narrow view of reality. Perceptions fall into two categories: accurate and inaccurate. Just because your workers perceive something and generally agree doesn't make it so. In fact, inaccurate perceptions of safety issues can result in the misdirection of safety efforts. When workers focus on issues of little consequence and ignore more impactful issues, their efforts don't produce efficient results.

So, what is needed to measure the accuracy of perceptions? This requires a comparison of reality to perceptions. For example, if workers perceive the most common type of accident in their facility is a trip or fall, does the accident data validate or contradict this?

If workers perceive receiving adequate information on accidents occurring at other sites, does the overall data indicate lessons are learned and similar accidents are prevented, or that the same type of accidents regularly repeat at different sites? If workers perceive their safety training is good or adequate, do accident reports regularly indicate a lack of knowledge as a contributing factor to the accident?

In addition to comparing perceptions to reality, it is important to compare perceptions to strategy. If you strategically target improved teamwork in safety, do workers perceive that is happening or not? If you strategically target a type of management style in safety, do workers perceive their boss to be demonstrating that style of management or another type? If you strategically target more effective safety communication, do workers perceive it is working and can they remember and repeat the important messages communicated? This kind of comparison is another example of why strategy should precede assessment. It also is a reason for using customized rather than off-the-shelf assessment instruments in order to accurately target the most important perceptions to measure for comparisons to reality and strategy.

Frequency of Assessments

The frequency with which assessments are made also is vitally important. Like any metric used for management, assessment data needs to be timely.

Managers who cannot measure their progress toward strategic goals often tend to "work in the dark," hoping the next measurement will show progress. Also, visible progress toward strategic goals has been shown to be highly motivational. When workers see regular progress reports, their efforts are more meaningful and better targeted. Efforts that are not producing desired results are identified earlier and wasted time and resources are redirected. Few organizations assess their cultures or programs frequently enough to maintain momentum and manage the change efficiently. Expensive generic perception surveys can make such frequent measurement cost prohibitive.

Assessments also can be done too often, although that rarely happens. Workers can tire of constant questioning and measuring and become almost immune to the process. More often, organizations perform assessments and fail to respond to what workers have told them or fail to communicate how and when they have responded. When the results of an assessment have not been shared or acted upon, workers are less willing to actively and willingly participate in another.

Many of the organizations with excellent performance in safety attribute their success in part to the development of an overarching strategy for safety and regular assessments to monitor and direct their progress toward their strategic goals. The old safety practices of simply trying to fail less and measure progress with lagging indicators quickly is being replaced with strategic thinking and proactive leading

indicators.

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