

Fear: The Enemy of Safety Excellence

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It is ironic that organizations encourage risk taking and develop a tolerance for failure in pursuits such as marketing and new-product development, but have a completely different view of safety.

Certainly, no one wants to fail at safety. Safety failures can be catastrophic and costly. But when the fear of failure becomes the primary driver of safety efforts, the results often are self-limiting.

The fear-driven safety program tends to steer organizations to take steps directly aimed at avoiding failure. The definition of success becomes "to fail less." Goals are based on negative steps, such as avoiding risks, and the metrics are failure metrics. Blame and punishment often are attached to failures and the lack of failure is rewarded without regard to the performance that led to it.

Luck is rewarded the same as safe performance, as there is nothing to distinguish between the two. Lagging indicators guide efforts and key performance indicators either are not developed, are ignored or are viewed as "soft" metrics. The proverbial "wag the dog" is in full effect and the focus on results makes the processes and performance that actually produce the results disappear into the background.

Management's fear of safety failure can lead to other self-limiting approaches. Safety, which should be a strategic job of management, often is delegated to safety "specialists," who are expected to lead the effort to fail less. Executives and senior managers often separate their duties from safety and also may allow lower-level managers and supervisors to do the same.

Business and safety are managed as two separate priorities and may compete for resources, time and worker attention. It becomes a dichotomy in the minds of workers, who often ask which is most important each day. The fear of safety failure keeps the business leader's attention until the fear of business failure becomes greater. Safety based on fear never becomes a value because its priority changes when one fear outweighs another.

Fear of Failure: Contagious

Leaders whose primary goal is to avoid failure often try to convey their fear to the workforce. They hypothesize that if workers also fear failure, it might align efforts to fail less. Guidelines center on avoidance and management style focuses on negative consequences to emphasize these goals. In this mindset, proactivity in safety means making rules and procedures that minimize failures. The goal is compliance rather than excellence.

The safety professionals become the safety police and workers begin to develop avoidance behaviors. There are only three possible consequences of safety for workers:

1. Getting injured
2. Getting caught in non-compliance, or
3. Getting away without consequence.

Great safety performance is not rewarded more than mediocre performance if neither result in consequences. Excellence is never better than "good enough."

When incentives are attached to the lack of failure, the outcome can be disastrous.

OSHA has realized that rewarding a lack of injuries can result in non-reporting rather than improved performance and has moved against such incentive programs. Still, many organizations celebrate lagging-indicator milestones without reinforcing the effort that produced the result. Workers who contributed to the improvements receive no more recognition than workers who took risks but were not caught or injured.

The implied definition of safety success as not getting injured continues to mislead workers into thinking that any performance or practice that doesn't produce an injury or punishment must be safe. If the result of performance is less failure, the performance is, formally or informally, approved and reinforced by the organization.

The delegating of safety by organizational leaders is not just an abdication of a basic duty, it is a means of creating a scapegoat for potential failure. If the leader can produce a profit, even at the cost of accidents, the leader succeeds in production and the failure belongs to the safety professional.

When this occurs, the interconnections between production and safety are not addressed. The holistic thinking around "safe production" is undermined by the assertion that each is a separate aspect of work with different leaders and different priorities. Safety gets lip service and production gets rewarded. Productive workers get raises and promotions, and safe workers who are less productive get criticized and corrected. The boss gets bonuses when production is good and the safety manager gets replaced when safety pays the price for that production.

Managing by fear of failure promotes lagging indicators as the ultimate metric of safety. All programs and efforts are measured by their impact on failure rates and the cost of failures. The cause-and-effect relationship of programs to results is assumed rather than measured, and every effort either passes or fails the lagging-indicator test. Program or process efficiencies are not considered in management decisions because there are few or no metrics to gauge and understand them.

Programs that could have impact with a little more time or effort may be scrapped as failures without having a chance to succeed. New programs and processes get practiced too long before being evaluated because it takes longer to develop meaningful lagging indicators. New efforts that are ineffective can be disguised by other factors that improve lagging indicators or simply by a normal variation of results that corresponds to the programs. Measuring effectiveness of new safety efforts by the impact they have on lagging indicators often ignores important other factors and data trends.

Is More Better?

Defining success as the lack of failure also drives the "more is better" mentality in safety. When failure rates are unacceptable, the organization decides it needs to do more. Programs are implemented on top of other programs in an array of accountability that can be more confusing than focused.

Safety activities are measured by volume rather than value: Unproductive activities are perpetuated and added to, rather than eliminated, and replaced with higher-value activities. Most organizations don't need to do more in safety; they need to do better.

The most-excellent safety cultures have a healthy sense of vulnerability to accidents, but their motivation comes from a quest for success, not the fear of failure. Success is defined and worked toward. Failure is the

lack of success, not the opposite. Fear is not the driver, nor the tool of success. It is the enemy.

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