

# Is Winning or Losing a Safety Culture Habit?

Winning in safety isn't necessarily accomplished with more effort, programs, activities, paperwork, and meetings. In fact, many times, less is more.

**W**hen you achieve a year without a recordable injury, do you know why this was a winning year? What is your confidence and strategy to win even more next year?

Goals in safety should be focused on winning, not failing less. Are we winning more today than yesterday? Are we winning the hearts and minds or nudging more hands and feet? You don't win more by holding ground; you win by continuously advancing. You don't win more by creating more rules of the playing field or by increasing incentives; you win more by creating a culture where winning is a shared desire. You win more when winning is a habit.

Vince Lombardi, known as one of the most successful coaches in NFL history, believed, "Winning is not a sometime thing; it's an all the time thing. You don't win once in a while; you don't do things right once in a while; you do them right all the time. Winning is habit. Unfortunately, so is losing." Is winning a habit in your organizational culture?

Winning in safety isn't necessarily accomplished with more effort, programs, activities, paperwork, and meetings. In fact, many times, less is more. Training is never sticky enough for all of the information to be retained. Increased emphasis on the number of Job Safety Analyses, behavior-based safety observations, toolbox talks, and inspections can contribute to improved performance, but only to a point.

In fact, beyond this "point," more effort for the sake of more also can contribute to disengagement and lack of interest if it is perceived as non-value-added or too much. Remember, those impacted by safety efforts should be treated as the customers of the effort, not the targets, when discretionary engagement is the goal. Compliance-based improvement initiatives have a lot of limitations.

With less time, attention, and resources, it is vital that the choice to win be focused on perception of value over quantity if we want a culture with a desire to win, rather than just doing the minimal necessary to get by. Most employees already have an intrinsic desire to win in safety. They want to return home injury free and, to many of the workforce, this is winning. Unfortunately, they are incorrect. To win is not the absence of failure, and safety is not the absence of injury. But herein lies the challenge: What does winning look like in safety, how aligned is everyone on this, and how do you create a sense of winning after you have achieved zero injuries?

What does winning in safety look like in your organization? Many of us have traveled to other locations or companies and,

while touring the location and interacting with a representation of the culture, thought to ourselves, "Wow, they are impressive." What did you see and hear that prompted that?

If you were to leave your company and return several years later after an impressive, positive transformation occurred and they, indeed, achieved Safety Culture Excellence, what would you and others see that indicates why your group has won? What would be observable that is different than today's reality? Most importantly, how did that gap become closed?

In consulting with most of the top-tier organizations in safety performance, even the best aren't always on the same page. This is largely due to competition in onboarding, initiatives, measurements, and performance appraisals. But that aside, if the executive leaders are not on the same page about what safety excellence looks like, what it takes to achieve and sustain it, and how to monitor continuous improvement progress, imagine what happens when this cascades throughout the organization.

If winning in safety is defined by what we collectively do to prevent injuries and incidents, it is easier to evolve the focus from results to activity-based measurements. However, we mustn't stop there. Some activities contribute to results, some only contribute to luck. The focus should be on activities that add value and advance the culture to sustain the injury-prevention efforts and activities that capture more hearts and minds. Otherwise, safety excellence comes to mean "no injuries," a dangerous cultural belief that reinforces risk-taking, as long as you don't get hurt.

After achieving zero-injuries, winning is defined by an enhancement in the beliefs, behaviors, and stories that shape the decisions and experiences of others, all of which can be and have been measured to validate progress in organizational improvement efforts. But for winning to become habitual in a safety culture, we must first get what this looks like into the heads of those whose hearts we seek and must be positively reinforced when we are making visible progress. Otherwise, we might be moving hands and feet, but surely winning is more than compliance behavior. Or are you satisfied with a culture of failing less? **OHS**

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