

Questioning the Key Pieces of Safety Strategy

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The best performers in safety realize more of the same is not the answer.

Sadly, more corporate safety initiatives are based on history than on strategy. The old adage, "We have always done it this way," is used to justify existing efforts and hide the need for seeking better methods.

Most organizations continue to manage safety the way they always have until the lagging indicators send them a wake-up call. Then, most respond by finding scapegoats or by adding more effort, rather than thoroughly examining their existing efforts. Thus, flawed or lacking safety strategies are perpetuated indefinitely.

More and more, organizations don't need to add to their safety efforts, but rather need to strategically improve the quality and effectiveness of their existing efforts. A good way to examine your existing safety strategy is to ask yourself some basic questions:

Basic Question No. 1: Have you created a shared vision of what safety excellence looks like? If you ask any worker at any level to describe the desired state of safety, will you get accurate and similar answers? Is the answer the cliché "lack of accidents," or does it describe what makes the accidents go away?

Follow-up Questions: Is this the best vision to direct the efforts of your workforce? Is it clear and does it describe the role of each individual? Does it truly direct safety efforts in the desired direction? Can you think of a better vision or better ways to effectively communicate and reinforce it?

Basic Question No. 2: What is the priority or value of safety compared to other priorities? Priorities change, but values do not. Is safety a changeable or unchangeable issue in your organization? Does the perception of safety among managers match the perception by workers? Are workers clear on how to make situational decisions when safety and production compete? Many organizations tell workers they have the right to stop work if they deem it unsafe, but not all workers would do so and not all feel confident they know the real criteria for making such a decision.

Follow-up Questions: Is your communicated priority or value of safety the best one to guide your workers' decisions in the workplace? Can you think of a better or clearer way to state the importance of safety that will result in better workplace decisions?

Basic Question No. 3: Who manages safety? Is it the member or members of the safety department, or is it the same people who manage production? Does everyone manage safety? To what extent do you expect workers to manage their own personal safety, and what training and resources do you give them to enable them to do so?

Follow-up Questions: Is this the best way to manage safety? If you rely on safety professionals to manage safety, do you have enough of them to do so effectively? Does this form of management create unity of purpose, or does it cause a conflict between safety and production in the minds of workers? Is this the best

set of people to manage safety? Could others manage safety more effectively or efficiently? What training would they need to do so?

Basic Question No. 4: What is the desired style of safety management? This is a question many organizations have failed to ask or answer. Should safety managers be controllers, collaborators, coaches, parental figures, safety police or simply subject matter experts and resources? How well-aligned in the desired style of management are all the managers of safety?

Follow-up Questions: Is this the best safety management style for your organization? How well do your workers respond to it? Is it producing the desired results? Can you think of a better management style to help you accomplish your desired state of safety excellence?

Basic Question No. 5: How is safety communicated? What do you communicate? What media do you use? How often do you communicate? Do you check for receipt of message? Does safety communication create alignment of knowledge and decision-making guidelines? Are lessons learned from past accidents and near misses effectively shared and acted upon?

Follow-up Questions: Is your current practice the best way to communicate safety? Have you measured its effectiveness or workers' perceptions of its effectiveness? Can you think of better ways to communicate safety?

Basic Question No. 6: Are your safety programs fit for your purpose? If you have added outside safety training programs, behavioral initiatives, VPPPA applications or other off-the-shelf programs to your safety program, are they creating synergy or anarchy? Do they align well with each other or do they have competing efforts or conflicting terminology?

Follow-up questions: Are these the best programs to help you accomplish your goals? Are there better programs, or would you be better without these programs?

Basic Question No. 7: Are your safety metrics effective? Are you still managing safety with strictly lagging indicators, or have you developed more prescriptive and predictive metrics? Do safety managers feel in control of the factors that determine safety outcomes? Can they produce excellent results and repeat them next year? Do you have metrics that are meaningful and directive for your workers?

Follow-up Questions: Are your current safety metrics allowing you to understand and manage safety effectively? Can you think of or develop more effective and useful metrics?

These seven basic questions not only are the ones that impact safety strategy, but they are crucial to success and often not asked. Pursuing safety in the same traditional ways almost certainly will produce similar or diminishing results, and almost is incapable of producing meaningful improvement that leads to world-class safety excellence.

The best performers in safety realize more of the same is not the answer. They also learn that simply adding more programs and processes will not help if the basic structure is not strategically aligned. In the end, the development of a strategy to achieve true safety excellence requires an honest self-assessment, which begins with asking and answering the right questions.

Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over. A respected strategist and thought leader in the industry, Mathis has published three books and numerous articles and blogs, and is known for his dynamic and engaging presentations. EHS Today has named him one of the "50 People Who Most Influenced EHS" four

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