

The Four Core Components of Safety Excellence

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Organizations that have basic safety programs in place usually take one of two paths: either they turn their attention away from safety to other priorities, thinking their safety performance is adequate, or they turn their attention to true safety excellence.

Unfortunately, many companies that seek excellence simply try to do better at the basics. They do not realize the thinking and programs that got the organization from bad to good in safety will not take it from good to excellent. The organizations with the most excellent safety performance have added four core components to their safety efforts.

Strategy – While basic safety programs are adequate in the beginning, a true safety strategy is necessary to achieve the next level of excellent performance. Strategies can align thinking and fit among programs. Alignment and fit are the basic building blocks of organizational excellence.

It takes every person and every program working in the same direction with the same end goals in mind to accomplish exceptional results. Who manages safety and how they do it must be strategically decided and reinforced. How safety is communicated and motivated must match the management style. Safety meetings and training cannot be a mismatched or outsourced conglomeration of conflicting messages.

Compliance must become a minimum standard, not the ultimate goal. Accident prevention must be recognized as the outcome of excellence, not the primary target. Strategy is how to win, not just how "not to lose."

Assessment – Many of our clients initially have argued that assessment should precede strategy. However, we have found that a strategy based on an assessment tends to fill gaps rather than be a true strategy. Once a strategy is developed, an organizational assessment can identify the best opportunities to create alignment and fit with the strategy, rather than simply identifying perceived gaps between reality and some artificial ideal of perfection.

Assessment is difficult in organizations with trust issues. If employees are hesitant to point out issues for fear of the consequences, outside help may be necessary to truly assess the current status. Some organizations think they can overcome trust issues simply by using a perception survey that is filled out individually by each worker. While such surveys do provide a degree of anonymity, they don't allow for following up on the details of the issues that have been identified. This must be done in interviews or focus groups where the trust levels again become critical. Also, perception surveys only are one of several areas of assessment that are necessary to truly understand where an organization and its culture are in the progression toward safety excellence.

Perceptions are limited by two primary factors: accuracy and completeness. The fact is, perceptions can be completely different from reality. Workers' perceptions that their safety training is adequate might be completely refuted by testing their knowledge on critical safety issues. Workers might perceive their

greatest risk as burns when the accident data suggests trips and falls are far more common.

Also, workers don't know what they don't know. Testing their perceptions of anything in which their knowledge is limited creates relatively useless data. Accurately determining the current status is a necessary step toward more excellent performance.

Coaching – Excellence is not simply the result of great leadership; it is the result of leading great people. People become great through coaching. For an organization to move from good to great, coaching must become a skill that's regular use is expected and reinforced at every level of leadership. Performance coaching should be an integral part of the organizational training curriculum and refresher/follow-up training should be held regularly. It should be in the job description of every leader and a top item on their performance appraisal. It should be discussed in every leadership meeting and coaching best practices should be shared.

The continuous improvement of the performance of direct reports should be the primary goal of every leader and should become the standard by which their own performance is judged. Specific safety improvement targets should be selected in every work group and should be the focus of the coaching efforts. Every day, specific safety improvements should be visible and expected. This improvement should become the primary driver of safety, replacing the lagging indicators which should approach zero as the improvement efforts bear fruit.

Engagement – Aligning workers and coaching them is a good start toward getting them engaged in safety, but more is needed. Workers need opportunities to be involved in the work of safety in a meaningful way.

Well-designed and executed behavior-based safety (BBS) processes are one example of how this can be achieved. If workers are included in the design of the process, and learn through discovery which behaviors can have the greatest impact on accidental injuries, they develop a sense of ownership for this part of safety. If they can be involved in meaningful observations, then this interaction between workers becomes an extension of the safety coaching performed by leadership.

When this happens, all interactions between workers and leaders or workers and other workers are aligned, and the two programs are fit for purpose and they support the safety strategy. Organizations with good safety strategies readily can select the process with the best fit and avoid the less-than-effective safety programs.

Some or all of these four core components can and often do become a part of initial, basic safety efforts. If they already are in place, they should be used and not replaced. However, organizations with the most excellent safety performance tend to adopt all four of these and strive to make them work together with synergy and harmony. It is important not to wait until you have the perfect plan to get started. Excellence is a process that grows from sincere intent and effort and from having all the core components in place to enable success.

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