

What Does Safety Success Look Like?

Because of the reactive approach to measuring and managing safety prevalent in the world today, the true definition of safety success has been obscured.

By Terry Mathis

The surface definition of safety success on most safety professionals' minds is simply a reduction in the failure rate. We have been so busy avoiding failure that we need to remind ourselves what success looks like.

The word "success" tends to surface every time the accident rates go down, but does the lack of accidents really equate to safety success?

The answer is a definite "maybe." Reductions in accidents can be the result of successful safety efforts. Reductions also can occur as part of the normal variation in accident rates and a dozen or more other reasons, all of which are temporary. Like the Hawthorne Effect, they are real but not easily sustainable.

So what does safety success look like? How can we recognize it among the temporary imitations? I would like to suggest that all truly successful safety efforts have all or most of the following qualities in common. The more of these qualities, the more successful the effort.

1.) Proactive

It is difficult or impossible to become proactive until you have become successfully reactive. Truly successful safety efforts have begun to max out traditional reactive safety and go well beyond these minimal efforts to "get ahead of the curve" in safety efforts. Success in reactive safety generates the necessity for proactive safety.

When you use accident investigation data to improve safety, the more you succeed, the less data you have. Before

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the accident data disappears it does another nasty trick: it loses its statistical significance.

I have worked with dozens of safety professionals who were chasing the last few data points of accident investigations and becoming increasingly frustrated with their lack of ability to generate further improvements. That last bit of accident data tells you that you are not perfect; but it doesn't tell you how to get better.

2.) Focused

When I ask workers what their greatest risks are, I usually get as many answers as workers interviewed. Traditional safety generates so many rules, procedures, JSAs, etc., that they tend to overwhelm and diffuse worker attention.

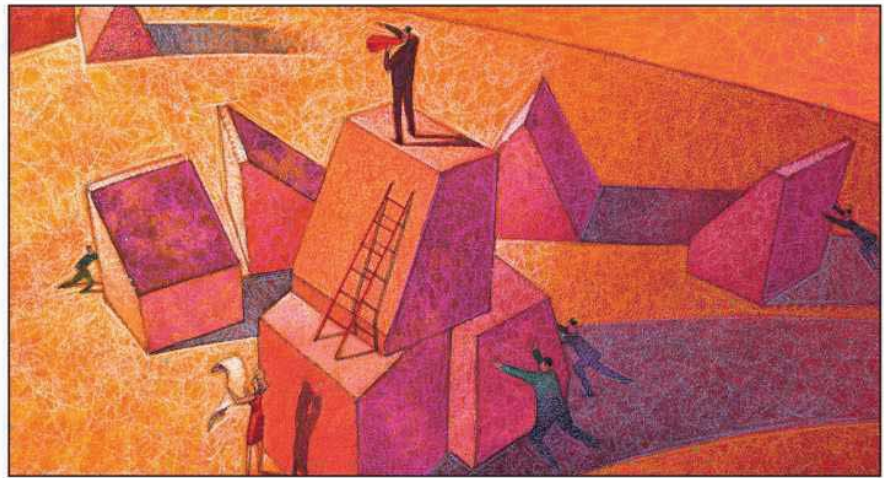
Truly successful safety efforts generate a focus on the most important dangers and the precautions that can best avoid them. The narrow focus needs to be communicated relentlessly until workers actually memorize the list.

Many sites create acronyms or other mnemonics to aid the learning and retention of the focus list. Then they reinforce the list until it becomes second nature or even habitual. Once workers automatically take the most critical precautions, the accident rates go down and stay down. I often suggest that FOCUS is an acronym for Forming One Common Understanding of Safety.

3.) Transformational

I asked a safety professional in a new client firm, "What are you currently focusing your personnel on in safety?" He responded that the corporate safety department had a new standard for steel-toed boots and that he had received complaints about his maintenance personnel not doing good housekeeping, so he was focusing on those two areas. This actually is a narrower focus than I usually find, but it also is an ineffective focus.

When we completed a Pareto Analysis of the division's accident data for the past 5 years, we found that if they had perfect compliance with wearing steel-toed boots and were doing perfect housekeeping, they would have had a 3 percent reduction in recordable accidents. We found four catego-



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ries of precautions that could have, if perfect, produced a 79 percent reduction in accidents.

Precautions that can potentially have a significant impact on accidents are called transformational precautions. Truly excellent safety efforts are not striving for modest gains, but working toward goals that can truly transform the accident rates with a minimal effort.

4.) Involves Workers

Management efforts to improve safety can be highly effective, but almost inevitably are limited if worker involvement is not increased.

Deming said that you should always involve the people who know the most when solving organizational problems. There always is a level of knowledge in safety that is largely restricted to the people doing the work. Truly excellent safety efforts attack risks on two fronts: the management front and the cultural (or worker-involved) front. Managers should dictate compliance with laws and company policies as a condition of employment and enforce them accordingly. Workers should identify precautions that go beyond compliance and tap into worker discretionary efforts to further move safety efforts

toward excellence.

Deming also said that people support what they help create. Involving workers in the creation of the second front on risks not only increases effort, it increases involvement and ownership of safety at a personal and cultural level.

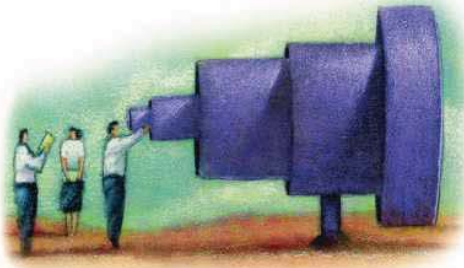
5.) Clearly Communicated

Effective communication is a trademark of safety success. Both the quantity and quality of safety communication are critical to safety success. Workers tend to perceive organizational priorities by the quantity of communication about one priority vs. another. When managers and supervisors talk about productivity much more often than safety, this tends to create the perception that productivity is important and safety is a lesser goal.

Because of changing priorities and changing perceptions, many have suggested that safety should be a value and not a priority. If this goal is to be accomplished, it will require a steady flow of communication that does not waiver or bend and management decisions that demonstrate the commitment.

Many do not view decisions as a form of communication, but deeds actually do speak louder than words in

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many organizations. Everyone in the organization should self-monitor their level of safety communication in both word and deed to determine if safety is truly clearly communicated. If deeds and words don't match, the communication is not clear.

6.) Results Oriented

Many recent safety processes have encouraged an emphasis on process metrics over results metrics. Taking one's eyes off the bottom line is fraught with danger. While process metrics are critical, they are not the truly important measures of safety.

Processes that do not produce downstream results are not working and should be revised or scrapped. The true value of process metrics is to determine if the process is being worked and if the process is working. Profound knowledge of safety is neither process or result metrics; it includes knowledge of the process and result metrics as well as having an understanding of the relationship between the two.

Many safety programs and processes create a process mentality. I often visit a process at a site and the process leaders make excuses with their process metrics for their lack of results in real safety improvement. Safety success does not mistake effort for results.

7.) Multi-dimensional

The safety world is full of subject-matter experts trying to disguise science as technology. We constantly are being exposed to new or revised processes that are largely one-dimensional, one-science approaches to one symptom of safety failure.

There are safety products that are 99.9 percent pure psychology, sociology, behavioral science or other academic disciplines, but safety success is not a one-trick pony. Many academic areas have valuable contributions to make in safety. Most successful safety efforts use a mixture of these to customize and address the specific site culture.

8.) Integrated

Truly successful safety efforts are not something else you do; they are the way you do everything. The more "apart" safety efforts are from

day-to-day functions, the less successful they are. Safety programs and processes that do not mesh into the fabric of day-to-day activities are seldom successful and are not sustainable.

If your organization practices Six Sigma, your safety processes should parallel or even piggy-back on these methods and efforts. The same personnel can be trained and use their training to address quality issues and safety issues in the same way. If you do lean manufacturing and your safety program is full of muda, you will not be successful.

Safety, ultimately, is not affected by quality and staffing levels. Safety is a quality issue and a staffing issue. When we integrate safety into everything else, we can truly make it a value and not just a changeable value.

9.) Practical

Too much of what is marketed to the safety community is not based in the reality of the workplace. Joe DeMaggio said, "In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is!" Many who are vaunted as safety experts never have been in the workplace without a visitor's badge and borrowed hardhat.

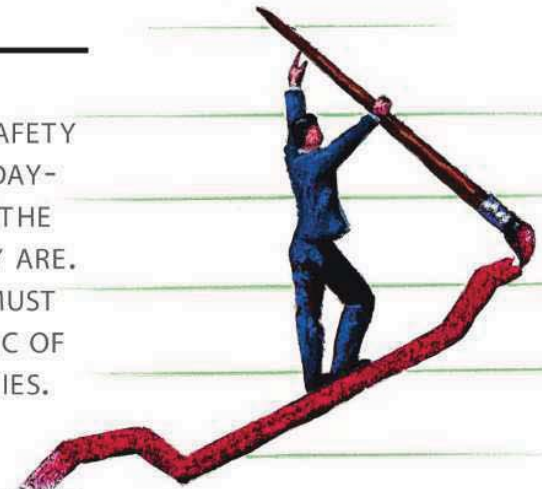
Safety success can be advanced by theories, but it ultimately is not a theory. Safety success is impossible if it does not fit the cultural, procedural and conditional realities of the workplace. A corporate safety director who called us in to fix a broken process he had tried said, "God, it sounded great! Too bad the workers hated it, and the supervisors were afraid of it and the managers couldn't make it work."

10.) Humanistic

Ultimately, the reason for working on safety is as important as how you work on it. If your goals are all financial and benchmarking in their orientation, you will not win the hearts of the people who can make you successful. They will be careful because it is their welfare on the line, but they will not help you reach that level of excellence unless you answer the old "WI-FM (What's in it for me?)" question.

One of the safety professionals at the TVA nuclear sites had a sign on his desk that said, "No one cares how much

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IF YOU THINK OF SAFETY AS A VACUUM WITH NO ACCIDENTS, YOU'LL FALL INTO THE TRAP OF AVOIDING FAILURE AND YOUR EFFORTS BECOME NEGATIVE AND INEFFECTIVE.

you know unless they know how much you care." Safety is about people, not numbers. If we use the numbers to help the people, the people will help us with the numbers. If we try to use the people to help us get our numbers, we usually fall short.

I once kept a safety manager at Sandia National Labs late in training and he had to conduct a safety meeting with one of his crews. Instead of presenting his usual PowerPoint with the TRIR and accident data, he simply showed up and told everyone how much he cared about them and wanted to keep them safe. Everyone on the crew lined up to shake his hand and tell him that it was the best safety meeting they had ever attended.

He remarked that in previous meetings, he always said he cared and then showed the figures. They took that to mean that he cared ... about the figures.

Safety is a condition of operations that has certain qualities. When you achieve the qualities, the numbers follow. If you think of safety as a vacuum in which accidents have all been sucked out, you fall in to the trap of avoiding failure and your efforts become negative and ineffective.

Define safety as what you do, not as what does not happen, and you will empower yourself, your management and your workers with a sense of direction and purpose that will help you achieve the success you thought was out of reach in your traditional approach to safety. **OH**

Terry Mathis founded ProAct Safety in 1994 and serves as president. Before founding ProAct, he was a director of training for Coca-Cola where he developed several new innovative approaches to safety, and worked for two of the major safety consulting companies. Mathis is a veteran of over 700 safety improvement projects in 18 countries and 12 languages, has spoken at the American Society of Safety Engineers' annual conference, regional conferences and Seminar Fest, the National Quarry Safety Association (2000), the Human Resource Safety Conference (1999) and various other safety and training functions. He is a professional member of ASSE. He holds a bachelor's degree in technical communications and has pursued graduate work in instructional technology and organizational psychology.