

10 questions to ask about your safety program

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When approaches to find new results do not quickly yield a return on investment (ROI), it is logical to look for something new to try. Why did the tactic not work? Was it the tactic itself, or the execution of it?

There is nothing wrong with a never-ending search for more elements to enhance our proverbial safety toolbox; in fact, this is vital to evolution. However, we must remind ourselves that our world is becoming leaner. While the amount or availability of individuals reduces, the scrutinizing of budgets increases. Doing more with less is a reality for all.

For organizations maintaining mature safety programs and culture, further improvement rarely results from more activities. Rather, it lies with ensuring maximization of efficiency and effectiveness within existing tools, focus and ownership. Prior to searching for a new solution, consider reexamining your existing strategies by asking and seeking answers to the following ten questions.

- 1. What is the goal?** Simply put, what are you trying to accomplish? It is important to place focus on improving safety rather than accomplishing specific tasks. However, to not appear naïve, all initiatives will have short-term process performance indicators, but these are not truly the goal. Ensure everyone involved (participating, or a customer of the initiative) sees how this fits into the overall strategy in safety improvement.
- 2. Are the expectations clear?** Can people recite what the expectations are? Remember, results and performance expectations are often two different things. It is critical that people know what results are expected to measure their own progress towards completion or success. However, if the performance necessary to achieve success is ambiguous, alignment will not occur and people will be essentially guessing.
- 3. Who determines and recognizes the value?** Can people point to the value this effort provides? Is it clear how this effort can be measured against an overall safety excellence strategy that you are executing? Consider performing a value stream map (current and future-desirable state) of the initiative or tool. Value stream mapping is very effective to identify the elements (process, flow, communication, data, effort, etc.) that 1.) add no value and can be eliminated, 2.) add no value but are critical/necessary and 3.) do add value. This strategy will also help you identify the different stakeholders or customers as mentioned in question one.
- 4. Is the WIIFM question answered?** Does this program answer the famously selfish, but realistic question: What's in it for me? Someone can see the value in your effort for the overall benefit of the organization or safety improvement, but not see how it impacts them personally at 2:30 in the morning when hyper-competitive priorities kick in and occasionally influence undesirable actions. It is not always possible to show personal value and provide an answer to the WIIFM question; however, let us not ignore it. Consider brainstorming with different stakeholders how what you are doing adds value to the employee, the employee's family, their department, and the overall company or site. This exercise will begin to answer this question, yet it is important to never assume what is valuable to one person is shared by all.
- 5. How much creative input was a part of the design?** Any time a process fails to provide the desirable results, ask yourself, "How much creative input did I provide to the targets of this change or initiative?" Remember, if you desire ownership, involvement is vital. In general, discretionary effort will come more from

someone who is a part of the design, than by those it is designed for.

6. Is the initiative flexible? Any approach that provides new value, new results, or improves performance or culture will need to be tweaked at some point. Otherwise, it will become an awkward fit. Occasionally, with question one, identifying the goal, the purpose may have been short-term and the results have been exhausted. If true, perhaps a more flexible and expandable option might be a better solution? Make the approach and initiative fit your organization, rather than making your organization fit a pre-defined solution. Can your current program grow with you? For this to occur, there needs to be a positive answer to the next question.

7. Are the expertise internalized? Do you have the internal expertise to continuously evolve your existing strategies and tools? Companies with a dependency on vendors for the effectiveness or enhancements of their tools result in unhealthy and unsustainable relationships. While not always possible or practical, any expertise in a tool that is necessary for the continuance of your performance is better internalized than externalized. Should your budget get cut, and mandatory services or royalties go unpaid, your results will often suffer. This is not in the best interest of the organization.

8. What triggers activity? What prompts activities to occur? Are they reactive or proactive? In medical terms, when our bodies react to something, this is negative. Responding, however, is positive. What percentage of your overall activities are reactive vs. proactive? A healthy mixture is necessary, such as a very effective emergency response plan. World-class operations favor much more preventative efforts than reactive ones. Are activities driven by the desire for results, or to meet numbers or key performance indicators? (e.g., are activities, like behavioural observations, triggered by the need for more observations, or the need to understand influencers, risk exposure, or encourage specific precautions? Do we hold safety meetings because the time has come, or to proactively discuss a newly-identified risk?)

9. What is the knowledge of the focus? Can any employee tell you the current focus or objective of the program or initiative you are exploring here? For example, if employees cannot name the focus of the behavioural observations, you will forever rely on the checklist. If people are unaware of the focus of the initiative, how will they measure if it is successful? How will they see value and answer the WIIFM question?

10. What are the successes? “If you don’t blow your own horn, there will be no music.” – Alan Weiss. For most committees, like most programs, the biggest opportunity for further gains will come from being a bit of a braggart. For fear of appearing to be one, most teams or those managing activities, fail to over-communicate their successes. When this occurs, it is normal for others to view the teams or efforts as ineffective or insignificant. This obviously compromises the volunteerism, which is so desirable by most organizations. Would you join a team or initiative if you felt it was pointless? Probably not. Ensure anyone, when prompted, can name two or three successes from your efforts over the past few months.

If your answers to the previous questions are mostly negative, but you have received results from your effort, I would argue the results will be temporary, at best. By recognizing that most projects do not fail in the end, they fail in the beginning, there is still hope. Experience has taught me that positive answers to these questions are critical to achieve sustainability.

No two organizations are the same. Even within a company, no two sites or groups are identical. Each has different complex cultures, history of past successes and failures, leadership and followership styles, and willingness and unwillingness to support different things. Take these questions, not as a prescription for success in any activity; rather that they may encourage you to question your results, positive or negative, from your efforts.

Even with success, we must remember that sometimes we have become so because of intentional effort,

others because of luck. Remember, luck is far from a sustainable strategy of world-class operations.

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