

Safety and Performance Excellence: The Power of Shared Definitions

Don't get so wrapped up in creating a vision statement for safety that you forget the basic definition of what safety means to your organization.

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Recently, a safety professional posed a question on a safety-related web site. He asked, "What is your working definition of safety?" Although everyone responding was a safety professional, many with years of experience and academic credentials, the answers varied greatly. Each response had merit and addressed one or more aspects of accident prevention, but none really encompassed the whole issue in a way that would bring clarity and focus.

In my consulting experience, very few organizations have taken the trouble to define safety and the basic terms related to it. Many have created elaborate safety mission and vision statements designed to direct and motivate efforts, but I have found that a lack of unity in definition can inhibit efforts to improve safety. For example:

Leadership – If the organization thinks safety must be led, it tends to develop a do-as-you-are-told culture. Blind dependence on leaders is dangerous and such cultures almost never reach excellent performance in safety.

Following the rules – If workers think of safety as simply following the rules and procedures, their safety performance will be determined by how accurate and complete the rules are and by their level of knowledge and compliance with the rules. Almost all workers readily will admit that they can obey all the rules and still get injured on the job.

Paying attention – If workers believe or leaders preach that safety is simply a matter of paying attention to the job, workers tend to depend on their conscious decisions rather than their habits to keep them safe. Most sites have risks that could best be addressed by a combination of conscious awareness AND routine tasks with risks for which the precautions should become habitual and not require deep thought. Strict attention to detail in the conscious mind is impossible during an entire 8- to 12-hour shift.

Experience – Workers who have longer tenure tend to better understand the risks on a job. However, organizations that solely rely on worker experience seldom reach excellent safety results. By the time workers have learned all the risks by experience, they usually retire and a new group of workers begin the experience cycle.

Common sense – Leaders who encourage workers to use common sense to avoid accidents either ignore or misunderstand the nature of low-probability risks. In most organizations, workers don't experience high-probability risks unless they slip up or have a lapse of performance. That is what common sense does: It keeps workers from taking "common" risks, i.e. risks that are obvious and easily discerned with common logic. If you believe current accident data, the average risk that injures a worker on the job is a 1-in-500 (or

more) risk.

Another complication of developing working definitions of safety is that the definitions might vary by level in the organization. For instance, a manager's definition of safety might entail communicating risks and safety strategies to workers, whereas a worker's definition of safety might entail knowing the risks and taking the proper precautions. For definitions to be effective in aiding safety performance, they must be prescriptive and not just descriptive. They must focus efforts on effective accident-prevention strategies.

My suggested starting definition of the term "safety" contains three parts:

For managers and supervisors, safety is:

- Knowing the risks on each job or task.
- Eliminating or minimizing the risks if possible.
- Communicating the remaining risks to workers and training them in effective precautions to minimize the remaining risks.

The managers' job begins with the design of the facility and never ends. It also includes attempting to hire qualified and safe people to do the work.

For workers, safety is:

- Knowing the risks (what can hurt you and how it can happen).
- Knowing the precautions that can minimize the risks.
- Consistently taking those precautions.

Your definition should include the knowledge of risks, risk-minimizing strategies and meticulous practice of those strategies. If you have terminology specific to your industry, you should include it in your definition to make it as relevant as possible to the job.

The second important definition to develop is for the term "accident." (If you have an aversion to this term, define the alternative term you use, such as "incident.") Accidental is the opposite of intentional; an accident was not intended to happen. Either of these scenarios can result in an unintended injury.

However, there are two ways for accidents to occur:

- A worker can do something he or she did not intend to do. In other words, the behavior was accidental or unintended. (The worker knew the risk and the precaution, but for whatever reason failed to take it.)
- A worker does something he or she intended to do but results in something they didn't anticipate. (They failed to see the risk or underestimated it, or simply did the job as they have habitually done in the past, but the low-probability risk turned into an injury this time.)

If such definitions are developed by the organization and shared through training and repeated communications, they can focus and direct safety efforts. They also can help to develop what Deming called "profound knowledge" of safety. Organizations with such shared definitions tend to perform at a higher level of safety excellence than those without them.

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