

Safety and Performance Excellence: How to Strategically Improve Safety Performance

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Organizations regularly set goals for improving safety performance, but few assess their current status and strategically plan the specific changes to accomplish the improvement.

Discussing "how" to improve is tactical. Discussing "what" to change is strategic. Sound strategy establishes a framework that helps everyone in the organization make decisions aligned to move the performance toward the goal or goals. It clarifies and prioritizes which activities will be most effective in accomplishing the desired changes.

The following model is one we use with client organizations to help them assess and strategically target areas of improvement. The model identifies three areas:

Focus – Sometimes referred to as "vision" or "mission." Many safety efforts either lack a focus or have one that is too broad. Success necessitates that those seeking it know what it looks like. Most safety efforts are designed to avoid failure rather than achieve success.

Improvement is a stepped process and cannot be accomplished all at once. Setting specific and memorable safety improvement targets can achieve higher levels of engagement, and quick wins in these targeted areas can motivate the effort.

Accountability – The consistent reinforcement of expectations. Some workers underperform because they don't know what to do and others underperform because there is no accountability. Many organizations connect accountability to safety lagging indicators. They punish workers for getting injured.

Such after-the-fact accountability often is ineffective and can drive down reporting rather than improve performance. Accountability needs to be proactive: based on performance, not results. Focusing on specific improvement targets enables such accountability on a microcosmic scale that often expands to overall safety improvement.

Knowledge/Skills – These are the safety IQ and talent of your organization. Without these qualities in your workers, there is no driving force for safety. Some workers underperform simply because they don't know what to do or how to do it safely. Few organizations truly have excellent onboarding or ongoing training programs to help workers achieve mastery in their crafts or include safety as a part of that mastery.

Concentric Circles

An ideal organization is one in which these circles almost or completely are concentric. Such perfection seldom exists and most need to examine each area for their strengths and opportunities for further improvement. A significant lack in one or any of these should suggest potential strategic improvement targets. They can be determined by interviewing employees or through customized perception surveys.

A lack of focus or insufficient focus will manifest itself in a lack of direction. Workers, when asked what is most important in safety, will give general and trite answers. They will refer to the goals of safety in ways such as "going home the same way you came to work (injury-free)." They will defer to rules and procedures or simply "thinking

before you act" as the way to accomplish safety. They may focus simply on wearing personal protective equipment as the way to be safe.

These types of responses reflect an unfocused safety mindset that will seldom, if ever, produce excellent safety performance. Sufficiently focused workers will respond with specific improvement targets and their responses will be uniform across the organization. Focus creates alignment of effort, which can help to accomplish desired improvements.

A lack of accountability will reveal itself through both highly variable performance and a lack of enforcement. It is important to realize enforcement is more than catching violators and punishing them. Positive reinforcement is a behavioral tool that greatly can help with accountability and often is underused.

Accountability is best accomplished by setting unwavering levels of expectation for safety performance.

This means exceptions to expected performance never are overlooked or ignored. It also means accountability is not attached to lagging indicators such as accidents or near misses. Good accountability will be reflected in both compliance with required safety behaviors as well as discretionary behaviors. It will enable high levels of uniformity in performance and promote a close culture connected by the values that uniform accountability helps to create.

Insufficient knowledge and/or skills usually manifest themselves in poor productivity and quality as well as poor safety performance. Deficits in knowledge or skill are opportunities for human error that can produce a range of undesired results. While poor performance can be prompted by process design, mechanical problems or cultural influences, these three conditions also potentially can be the cumulative results of inadequate knowledge or skills.

Many organizations try to hire candidates who already have adequate ability to do their jobs and assume the minimal refresher training in safety and other required topics will be adequate to maintain performance. However, there are three problems with this practice:

1. These assumptions are not always true;
2. Many jobs have escalating requirements rather than static ones; and
3. The goal is to improve and not just maintain the status quo; so further knowledge and/or skills almost certainly will be needed to improve.

Adequate levels of knowledge and skills almost certainly will be reflected in production and quality as well as safety. Workers who know how to do their jobs safely and well are the foundation of good safety performance. Be careful not to assume expertise is uniform across your organization. Often, there are pockets of workers who need more education or training due to being new on the job or changing job tasks.

A basic approach to safety-improvement strategy is to determine if your current status could have better focus and direction, better uniformity and accountability and/or better knowledge and skill levels. Another aspect of strategy is prioritization. If you need to improve in all these areas, should you address them all at once or in progression? Which would produce the greatest improvements and which would be the quickest and easiest to improve? Trying to do too much at once is a major cause of failure in safety, so don't overestimate your ability. Eat the elephant a bite at a time, but strategically pick which bite goes first.

Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations. A respected strategist and thought leader in the industry, Mathis has authored four 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 consecutive times. Mathis can be reached at info@proactsafety.com or 800-395-1347.

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