



SAFETY LEADERSHIP

Safety and Performance Excellence: Simplifying Safety

Albert Einstein said, “If you can’t explain it to a five-year-old, you don’t understand it yourself.” Some take this as an insult, but I have always thought of it as the ultimate challenge.

Terry L. Mathis | Nov 07, 2017

Can you really dig down to the essence of a matter and explain it in simple, understandable terms? We humans often overcomplicate matters. We begin with a few basic principles then expand them into countless specific examples. This process

has produced most organization's safety rules, coupled with legal departments wanting to cover liability at every possible contingency.

The problem with having too many rules is they don't direct efforts or efficiently align decision-making. They tend to overwhelm rather than direct. Our clients who achieve the best results in safety are striving to simplify, rather than to multiply, safety directives and efforts. They are boiling safety down to principles rather than rules. Principles direct efforts in a variety of situations, whereas rules and procedures focus on a few or even a single situation.

Are your safety programs teaching workers how to make safe decisions or are your programs trying to make every possible decision for workers?

This neither is an endorsement nor a condemnation of safety rules and procedures. Rather, it is a challenge to get to the real essence of safety. Once we understand what it really is about, the specific applications of it are more apparent and the need to memorize a list of how to deal with each and every specific situation is less critical.

Once we understand a principle of safety, we look for specific situations in which it applies and even expand our thinking into similar situations. Just as children were taught to look both ways before crossing the street, they soon realized it might apply to a sidewalk, train track or pathway.

Definition of Safety

When we ask workers their definition of safety, we get several common answers. These suggest that workers try to determine the real essence of safety but miss the mark in one way or another. Each of these answers suggests ways in which safety could be simplified and focused on the real, core issues that would empower them to make safer decisions:

Safety is taking your time and not rushing. This answer is indicative of workers who have developed a dichotomy between pace and safety. They think

accidents happen because one rushes. There can be truth to this view, but it also can be indicative of the lack of planning or pre-job inspection.

Fast is not necessarily less safe. There usually are other factors that make fast work more risky. It also is dangerous to perpetuate the myth that speed is your only danger. You can work slowly and deliberately and still fail to recognize risks and take precautions. Rushing often is listed as a contributing factor in accidents, but less often is the only factor. In fact, rushing usually results in another oversight or shortcut which is the immediate cause of the accident.

Safety is paying attention and thinking before you act. This answer presupposes that workers, given the opportunity, will identify and address risks. W. Edwards Deming said, “It is not enough to do your best; you must know what to do, and then do your best.”

Workers without the experience and/or training often are not aware of certain risks. Experience actually can diminish the sense of danger in cases where workers have taken low-probability risks and gotten away without injury.

Hazard/risk analysis is not just a matter of common sense or paying attention. It is a technology which few have studied thoroughly and on which few workers have been trained. Deming likely would have replied that you must need to know what to pay attention to and what to think about before you act. Only then would this approach be effective.

Safety is following the rules and procedures and wearing your personal protective equipment (PPE). This response has been conditioned into many workers through safety training and meetings. Organizations have relied on rules, procedures and PPE to provide what the safety hierarchy of controls labels “administrative controls.” This is secondary to addressing the hazard through conditional means such as removal or substitution of the hazard with something less hazardous or non-hazardous.

At the root of this is the mindset that worker behavior either is another risk to be controlled or another tool to control risks. Interestingly, when you ask workers if they can obey all the rules, follow all the procedures, wear the prescribed PPE and still get injured on the job, they overwhelmingly answer, “Yes!”

The fact that workers readily admit their approach to safety is not complete or perfect suggests that safety still has some mystery or unknown factors for most workers. Most oversimplifications have obvious exceptions. True principles, on the other hand, do not. Principles are absolutes; they either are principles or they are not. When you try to get to the core of safety but can think of exceptions, you are not there yet!

Simple definitions of what safety is, and is not, have proven to streamline and direct safety decisions for workers. Such definitions also can be principles which enhance a deep understanding of core issues. In five-year-old terms, we define safety as having three-parts: knowing what can hurt you, knowing how to keep it from hurting you and doing it every time without fail. In adult terms, we call it hazard recognition, taking those precautions every time. Accidents happen when workers either don't know the risk, don't know the proper precaution to take for that risk or fail to take the precaution.

Avoid overcomplicating safety for workers. Give them the core definitions and clearly define how safety decisions should be made. Dispel the oversimplified definitions and focus on the true principles rather than the specific applications. Think of workers as the customers of your safety programs, not the problems to be controlled. Don't try to govern workers. Teach them correct principles and let them govern themselves.

Terry Mathis is founder and CEO of ProAct Safety and has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over. A respected strategist and thought leader in the industry, Terry has authored five books, numerous articles and blogs, and is known for his dynamic and engaging presentations. Mathis can be reached at info@proactsafety.com or 800-395-1347.

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