

Safety and Performance Excellence: Zeroing In on Zero

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At the highest levels of performance, ongoing improvement must be made in small steps. Once this level of performance is reached, trying to do too much at once is almost as inefficient as doing the wrong things.

As organizations advance their safety performance, opportunities for further improvement dramatically shrink. Some think otherwise because the shrinking opportunities, as they diminish, become more difficult to identify. Those who don't realize these premises tend to fall into Einstein's definition of insanity; i.e., doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results.

These constitute our largest group of clients: the ones who ask us to identify why their safety efforts are no longer producing results.

Perhaps Marshall Goldsmith realized this in an even more universal way when he wrote "What Got You Here Won't Get You There." Goldsmith points out that we assume if we are successful and do things a certain way, we are successful because of what we do and how we do it. He goes on to point out almost all successes are due to some practices and in spite of others. He proposes the beginning step to further advancement is distinguishing between these two.

The Stages of Progress

All progress goes through stages. In each stage, the critical elements change, as do the skills and approaches necessary to move to the next step.

In safety, progress has several stages for individuals and for organizations. Unfortunately, most individuals and organizations view their roles and responsibilities in safety as more or less static. When results are less than desired, the common response is more activity. There is an underlying assumption that more is better.

In our experience only better is better, and sometimes more is such an overload that performance is damaged by the add-ons. Much of my work is determining what stage of progress an organization is in and helping them act accordingly.

The early steps of safety improvement are broad and basic. They include assessing and prioritizing risks and addressing them through a hierarchy of controls. Organizations in these early stages should focus on workplace improvements and completing rules and procedures. As this work progresses, they must begin to focus on compliance with their own rules and following their procedures.

They also must address regulatory compliance in the early stages. Regulations are a two-edged sword; they hold the risks of accidents but also the risk of enforcement penalties from fines to closures. Almost all safety and organizational professionals are familiar with what it takes to progress through these stages. Unfortunately, many never move on once they have passed this basic stage to adopt the methods to achieve the next level.

Worker Behavior

Organizations in the next steps of safety performance often focus on worker behaviors. If accident analysis indicates that many result from non-compliance, then mandatory behaviors should be more strictly enforced. Enforcement

does not simply mean catching and punishing offenders. It means setting and reinforcing standards of performance until they become firmly entrenched in common practice.

A tool that often develops during this stage is proactive accountability. This means compliance is enforced consistently and continuously and not just post-accident. Such accountability often necessitates additional training for supervisors or leads. Many at this level consider it their job to oversee production, not safety. This shift in focus may be beyond the training or ability of some.

If an analysis of accidents indicates compliance is good but accidents are occurring anyway, a whole new set of tools and focus is called for. The culprit contributing to accidents has shifted from mandatory to discretionary behaviors.

Almost always, there also has been a shift from higher- to lower-probability risks. Identifying and prioritizing low-probability risks is quite different from normal risk assessments. It first is necessary to differentiate between conditions that create risks and conditions that limit workers' abilities to take precautions. Failure to identify and focus attention on these new behaviors and conditions can render more traditional safety efforts ineffective. Also, the tools to change mandatory behaviors are completely different from the tools to change discretionary behaviors and, again, the old techniques simply don't produce further change.

Other Factors

Once organizations begin to master the two types of worker behaviors, they realize behaviors are influenced by multiple factors. Among the most important and potentially impactful of these influences is what we generally call safety culture. Culture is to a group what a habit is to an individual. Both can be either good or bad, and both tend to last a long time.

If you transform your safety culture into a good influence, it will continue to be one well into the future with minimal work to maintain it. It will influence those new employees coming into it in positive ways for several generations. Unfortunately, the basic tools of safety and even the behavioral tools are inadequate to drive a culture to its ultimate potential. Again, organizations stuck in the past don't move into the future.

Even many good safety cultures that coach and direct the performance of their members lack a basic element. Many experts espouse the characteristics that a good safety culture should have, but neglect the basic capability. Cultures that continue to identify the few remaining improvement opportunities and focus on and accomplish them, are the cultures that truly reach the continuous improvement stage.

Once organizations reach this stage, their targets for improvement significantly are fewer and harder to recognize. Continuing to work at basic safety without also addressing this new reality likely will cause stagnation of progress. At the highest levels of performance, ongoing improvement must be made in small steps. Once this level of performance is reached, trying to do too much at once is almost as inefficient as doing the wrong things.

Just as good parenting techniques should change as children grow through the stages of infant, toddler, etc., safety techniques should change as the organization goes through its stages of maturity. Each stage presents new challenges and diminishing opportunities for ongoing improvement. At each stage, the strategy also should change. Failure to recognize and address these progressive stages is the most common cause of the diminishing results many organizations experience.

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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