



SAFETY LEADERSHIP

Safety and the Ninja Wannabe

The most effective approach to reach safety excellence involves not just painting a picture of the desired state but creating a roadmap of how to get there.

Terry L. Mathis | Aug 29, 2018

I was watching a video on my computer of a series of interviews—several with political figures or professional athletes, and one with a contestant on a show called “American Ninja Warrior.” This wannabe ninja was asked what the hardest part of the contest was, to which he replied, “Letting go.” He explained that to traverse a set

of overhead swinging bars, moving from one to the next, that they were just a bit too far apart to reach without swinging the one you are on to get enough momentum to “jump” to the next. The uncertainty of whether or not you were close enough and had enough momentum made it very hard to let go of the bar you were on.

What does this story have to do with safety? It is the very essence of why safety does not progress. No one really objects to a brighter future or the adoption of new techniques and technologies; they simply have a difficult time letting go of the present. Most change agents focus on the future and paint a pretty picture of how great it will be. Few of them give enough attention to the present and how to let go of it. The present seems like an extremely comfortable place with few unknown threats and a well-defined set of expectations. The trouble is the world is changing so rapidly that the present is not a sustainable state, especially in safety.

Before exploring solutions to this problem, let's first examine some of the culprits.

OSHA Refresher Training

Regardless of any good intent, the overall best outcome of this training is to maintain status quo. Workers don't need to be refreshed; they need to be advanced. Training should make you better skilled, not just get you back to your previous level. The very idea that all you need is a “refresher” indicates you've already been exposed to all there is and there is really nothing new in safety.

Training used by most organizations is so repetitive and boring it sends the message that safety is some routine, monotonous series of topics that are automatic and hardly deserve attention. This is not a driver of change or continuous improvement.

Flavor of the Month

Some argue that safety is constantly changing because it adopts new programs. This programmatic versus strategic thinking is a driver of stasis. The basic concept stays the same and you can simply bolt on the latest fad program. It is like your mother forcing you to wear the latest fashion even if it doesn't fit.

Also, the failure rate of safety programs is often equal to or greater than the adoption rate. While this may qualify as change, it fails to be true progress.

Delegating Safety

When organizational leaders delegate safety completely, they send the message that safety is not truly a core value. When leaders are not engaged in safety at the strategic level, their safety professionals often create practices and programs that compete with production goals. This creates a dichotomy in the minds of workers that safety and productivity are competing priorities that they must choose between.

The concept of “safe production” goes out the window and workers tend to please the boss who gives them their marching orders or the one who can reward them most for their performance. Rather than advancing and improving, safety competes for a place at the table.

Reward and Recognition Systems

These fall into two categories: formal and informal. Formal reward systems are often based, at least in part, on participation in existing safety activities. What gets rewarded gets firmly planted in worker perceptions and actions. This can create significant resistance to changing from a familiar to a strange new system. Any change perceived as a “takeaway” will automatically demotivate workers and challenge the change.

Informal rewards and recognition potentially present an even greater challenge to improvement. Many organizations that preach safety only reward productivity. Regardless of the lip service given to safety, everyone knows what it takes to keep your job and get ahead. If safety is not rewarded, why should it be improved? Safety cannot be completely ignored in such any organization, so some minimal effort is given to it. But this effort is intended to avoid failing, not really to reach excellence.

An Unwillingness to Let Go

With these factors working against safety improvement, it can be difficult to make significant change happen. The answer is not to just diminish these distractors but to address the underlying factor in all of them: a deeply entrenched unwillingness to let go of the present. This tendency is not based on how perfect the present is, but rather the comfort level and how ominous the improvement seems.

The most effective approach to reach safety excellence involves not just painting a picture of the desired state but creating a roadmap of how to get there. It is also critically important that the first few steps of the journey be easy ones. The first steps need to be measured and reinforced. The expectation of change must be clear and involve action, not just a new mindset. This means that many changes may be needed to reinforce the desired evolution. A new safety strategy may need to be developed and communicated. Management styles and priorities may need to be updated to direct the change in the workforce. Desired characteristics and competencies in the safety culture may need to be defined and included in the strategy. Everyone must believe the current status of safety is not sustainable long-term and that change is not only desirable, but inevitable.

Like the ninja wannabe, we need to get momentum and be willing to let go of our current handhold if we are going to move on to the next level.

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