



SAFETY LEADERSHIP

Translating Safety

Too often corporate leaders and safety professionals speak very different languages. Learn how to overcome this language barrier.

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I recently consulted with a group of safety professionals who wanted help explaining to their corporate leaders how their function added value to the organization. I helped them explain the financial, legal exposure and PR benefits of good safety in terms C-suite executives would understand. Almost all the terminology I used was foreign to the safety professionals. There was no philosophical difference between

the leaders and safety professionals; safety priorities were a subset of executive priorities. The two groups simply spoke different languages.

In such situations, I have found four key strategies to overcome this misunderstanding:

1. Ask and answer the old WIIFM (“What’s In It For Me?”) question.

Both safety folks and executives tend to think that if they are setting and meeting their own objectives, they are obviously successful. Neither side truly considers what the other wants and needs. There is no “win-win” mentality expressed in isolated goals and objectives. Both groups actively impact the other but there is no coordination of these efforts. Corporate initiatives can have devastating impact on safety, and safety can practically shut down production if done in isolation. All too often, neither side asks how they will impact the other, nor are they explaining their actions in terms of how the other side will benefit.

2. Align strategically.

This whole dichotomy begins when organizational and safety strategies are developed independently of each other. Leaders must delegate day-to-day safety management but should not delegate the development of safety strategy. Safety strategy should be imbedded in organizational strategy in a way that sets clear priorities and directs tactical decisions. Effective strategy eliminates the need to wonder what leaders would do in particular situations. It establishes values by which situational decisions should be made. It also identifies priorities to keep important issues from receiving less attention than issues that seem urgent but are not as important.

A strategy that directs organizational decisions must be overarching and include all priorities such as safety, quality, environmental and regulatory issues. Sadly, most organizations do not have such a strategy.

3. Find common terminology.

Ideally, safety professionals should be business leaders first and safety specialists second. If they are trained as such, they will speak the language of business. This would put them more on the same page with their corporate leaders. Common terminology promotes better communication and coordination of efforts. Understanding organizational priorities empowers safety professionals to make contributions rather than working at odds.

When organizational leaders speak the language of production and safety leaders speak a different language, workers perceive a dichotomy between safety and productivity. This thinking undermines both production and safety. The idea of “safe production” gets lost. Leaders view safety as strictly a cost center whose goal should be to operate inexpensively. Safety leaders often say if organizational leaders are serious about safety they would “put their money where their mouth is.”

Safety leaders seldom think in terms of return on investment when they plan their budgets. By not communicating in business language, they diminish the credibility of their message and efforts. Unified terminology can ensure that production and safety both get attention. Eliminating this dilemma for workers tends to make them both safer and more productive.

4. Organizational design should facilitate cooperation.

Many companies have too many layers of management between safety leaders and organizational leaders. These middle managers often filter information between the two entities, preventing meaningful contact between them or formation of good working relationships. Safety needs a seat at the table with organizational leaders. Many safety efforts are too far removed from the strategic leadership of the organization. Safety becomes an afterthought or, worse, an annoyance to the real work of production.

Leaders who are not directly and frequently appraised of safety efforts tend to oversimplify safety and lack empathy for the daily challenges safety leaders face. In some organizations, the top safety leaders are in full command and dictate safety practices and programs. If they have a seat at the table and coordinate with other

leaders, then safety efforts can be strategically aligned. However, in other organizations, top safety personnel are basically subject-matter experts and serve as advisors to regional or site-level safety personnel. In such cases, continuity of efforts with strategy can be seriously compromised.

If the senior safety leader is not a dedicated safety professional but simply has safety as another responsibility, safety seldom gets the attention it needs to produce excellent results. An organizational chart should be designed with keen appreciation of how it will impact safety.

It is difficult for people who speak different languages to work closely and effectively together. When business and safety leaders have not only different agendas and priorities but speak different languages, collaboration and coordination are seriously compromised.

Safety is not something else you do besides work. Safety is the way you perform work. If the people who design operational/organizational strategy and the people who create safety strategy do not collaborate closely, the two strategies will almost always compete for priority and resources. When safety competes with productivity, productivity tends to win.

Likewise, if the leaders who give marching orders compete with those who give safety orders, workers are torn between these priorities. If production supervision controls the system of pay raises and promotions, they will be perceived as more important and powerful than safety leaders. Give your workers what they need to be successful at both production and safety. Make sure safety and production understand each other's needs, that they develop strategies that align rather than compete, that they speak a common language that fosters appreciation for the big picture of organizational success, and that the design of the organization supports these goals.

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