

# The Four Elements of Effective Measurement

Companies waste countless resources measuring the wrong things, not measuring at all, or failing to keep “the most important thing, the most important thing.”

By Charles J. Douros

**S**o often, safety strategy falls short of defining what a healthy safety process looks like in precise, measurable terms that lead to action and enable a prescriptive approach to safety efforts in the workplace. Furthermore, companies that set and reach a target of zero injuries can't claim success unless they know precisely what they did to achieve it and how to measure the performance it takes to sustain. Excellence is achieved

when successful performance is continually repeated, unprompted, and produces predictable results.

## Check Your Prescription

Earlier this year, I made an appointment to visit my personal physician for the most benign of reasons: I had a nagging sore throat that wasn't improving with over-the-counter solutions. While sitting in the exam room waiting for my doctor to enter, I wondered if this visit would begin and end like all those before—uneventfully. I

imagined the appointment would begin with pleasantries, a litany of the usual questions, a cursory exam, and subsequent discussion on the signs and symptoms of a typical sore throat. Over the years, I have come to expect the occasional round of tests or bloodwork to dig a little deeper and follow up on anything out of the ordinary *before* receiving the doctor's professional diagnosis and prescription for treatment. That's how it's supposed to go, but this visit would have a different outcome.

After the initial, cursory exam was over, the doctor excused himself for a couple minutes to retrieve his script pad. Upon his return, he handed me a completed prescription script for what was supposed to be a mild antibiotic for my sore throat. As he described the manner in which I should take the medication and the results I could expect, I glanced at the script and noticed it was for Cyclophosphamide, a medication given to treat patients with



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## STRATEGY

certain types of leukemia. Predictably, if only for a moment, I was stunned with the aggressive treatment plan the doctor prescribed for my otherwise benign sore throat. Almost immediately, I realized he handed me the wrong script, obviously meant for a different and less fortunate patient. The doctor had prescribed his patient the wrong treatment plan for the diagnosis.

While this was an unfortunate mistake, the business lesson was not lost on me. It occurred to me that organizations can make the same mistake in their safety journey. Just as doctors must prescribe the right treatment plans following a careful and accurate diagnosis, the best companies must make it a priority to assess the health of their culture before deciding what initiatives matter most and how to implement and ultimately measure them.

### Four Elements of Effective Measurement

Sadly, it is not uncommon for companies to prescribe safety performance measurements before first identifying “what healthy looks like” to their organization. Upon doing so, executives can find themselves measuring the wrong things for the wrong reasons without a clear understanding of why. Safety metrics and measurements should *prompt* specific action and *direct* efforts targeting transformational outcomes, the one or two things that will make the greatest difference to the organization. The right metrics *align* all levels of the organization to focus on keeping the most important thing, the most important thing. Effective metrics *motivate* leaders to stay the course and continue to do what works—and stop doing what doesn’t. Once your company’s measurements prompt, direct, align, and motivate the workforce to shape desired behaviors, better outcomes follow.

Without prescriptive data pointing to precisely what indicators will make the greatest difference in influencing the culture, a company could find itself acting on, and subsequently

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measuring, the wrong things by relying on anecdotes and opinions instead of fact. Just as the absence of illness does not always indicate the presence of health, the absence of injury does not necessarily indicate the presence of safety. There may be underlying or undetected factors influencing the wrong kinds of behavior, ultimately leading to risk or injury.

Our firm recently worked with the safety leadership team of an international conglomerate on a transformational safety project to improve focus among the supervisory level in the organization. An executive proudly showed a graph of how well they had eradicated footing-related incidents across the global organization and believed that to be transformational. While we agreed, the elimination of footing-related injury was important and could not be ignored, we pointed out that the Pareto analysis of the last 3–5 years of historical injury data revealed that footing injuries accounted for just 5 percent of their total incidents while proper tool use, including care and selection, accounted for 33 percent of their incidents. The data gave the executives confidence that it was a better business decision to shift focus to tool use, while maintaining existing efforts toward footing.

### Safety Excellence

Excellent organizations achieve stellar safety performance by knowing precisely what they did, in behavioral

terms, to get and repeat the desired results while maintaining a mind-set that continuous improvement is always possible. The right safety performance measurements reveal which behaviorally identified precautions will most effectively support desired, sustainable outcomes for a healthy safety culture.

Organizations with a mature safety culture are wise to consider their prior state and assess the relative health of their current state, including paying careful attention to signs and symptoms when something is not right with their safety process. Only then can they accurately diagnose the problem and prescribe treatment, much in the same way as a physician looks back into a patient’s medical history while assessing their current behavioral choices, fitness, medical condition, and lifestyle. Anything else would be malpractice. **SD**



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