

Aiming in the Wrong Direction: The Fallacy of Safety Goals

If you, the leader, are unable to describe in vivid detail what excellence looks like and your strategy to achieve it, don't expect others can.

It is unfortunate how visions and mission statements are typically perceived. Consultant after consultant charging substantial fees to assist executives in navigating down the path of vision and mission creation have created more buzzwords than executable or results-based outcomes. Do not be so quick to discount their value, however. What are yours, and what impact do they have on the organization, your strategy, and the tactics you deploy to execute against it?

From Safety Manager to Strategic Leader

Leading without a clear vision and vivid description of what it will take to achieve audacious goals is not only ineffective, it might just be career-limiting. Quite regularly, due to the exposure from my articles, podcasts, videos, and conference talks, I am approached by recruiters and retained by great organizations to assist them in their search for the new safety executive. Working with some of the most successful safety executives, I'm happy to assist and pass on names and contact details (all pro bono, of course).

During each conversation, the typical "What are you looking for in this person?" dialogue eventually surfaces. Details are often different, but the one common element is the individual's ability to be a strategic thinker and problem solver, develop a concise strategy, and deliver transformative results in a complex organization.

Integrating Safety and Integrating Business

This is no different than the realities of senior executives in an operations or production environment. If safety is to become "the way we do things," safety professionals need to think just as strategically as the executives to whom they report. Just as safety-thinking needs to be integrated into business, business-thinking needs to be integrated into safety.

An organization needs a clear vision that includes a core ideology with values and purpose and an envisioned future with detailed, daring goals and clear descriptions on how it will get there. Without it, the organization will eventually fall casualty to the hyper-competitive marketplace. Safety is no different; fight for a position within the other hyper-competitive business priorities.

Harsh Reality

If you, the leader, are unable to describe in vivid detail what excellence looks like and your strategy to achieve it, don't expect others can. Visions, missions, goals, and strategies are only as effective as the population's ability to repeat them, believe in them, and

the leader's ability to measure leading-indicator progress toward achieving them. The new program or training initiative you are searching for is not a strategy. Absent a detailed vision and strategy, your results will fluctuate, with sustainable improvement being only an elusive dream.

Radio personality Larry Elder appropriately once stated, "A goal without a plan is just a wish." While perhaps not so eloquently stated before, this is something we have known for years. Yet the average organization driving safety efforts points to, at worst, avoiding the regulatory authorities and, at best, failing less than the year before. Some might argue this is a strategy, but is that really the best one can do and the desired legacy to leave behind?



Whether BHAG (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals) or SMART (Simple, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-Bound) goals, those goals that are not measurable or time-bound are essentially a wish.

Questions to consider when developing your vision or goals:

1. Are your goals or visions focused on results, performance-based, or are they designed to be motivational?
2. Is the end-point destination defined in the negative or positive? Are you aiming at having fewer failures (injuries, incidents, defects) or achieving success by increasing leading indicators?
3. When created, how will you measure and determine the knowledge transfer from the communication?
4. How many people can recite it?
5. How will you conclude the believability of your goals or vision?
6. How will you take measurements if those impacted by the direction (executives to employees) know the role (behaviorally defined responsibilities) they play in achieving it?
7. How will you measure whether people are actually playing their part?

From Doers to Thinkers

We must be competitive to win and succeed — a realization not new to business, but unfortunately sometimes forgotten within safety departments and efforts. Politics, attention, budget, and priorities are part of all organizations, large or small. Safety professionals can be doers or thinkers. Moreover, they can be more than process owners, advisors, and subject-matter experts; but they must compete to be viewed as strategic players. This will occur only if they can demonstrate they are strategic thinkers. **OHS**

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