

Does Poor Safety Equal Poor Management?

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Many high-ranking leaders in various organizations have been quoted as saying that poor safety results are an indicator of other poor management practices. In interviews with top officials, the majority indicated that they demand excellence in safety from contractors and suppliers for the very reason that they view poor safety results as a warning sign of other management or performance weaknesses. Following this lead, many contractor management firms have vaunted safety as a primary condition of being included in the list of approved providers. But is safety necessarily linked to other performance areas, and if so, which ones? And what is the link?

To better answer this question, consider the potential causes for poor safety performance:

- Leaders of some organizations simply view safety as a low priority. This view can originate from other, more-valued priorities or from a philosophy that accidents are inevitable and unavoidable. Sadly, some organizations value the management of capital or technology more than the management of people and don't appreciate the importance of human capital.
- Some organizations think safety cannot be managed the same way as other priorities and delegate safety management to specialists. This separation of safety from other business priorities almost always results in workers giving safety less effort than the priorities managed by true organizational leaders.
- Other organizations try to manage safety but fail. The failures can come from a number of management flaws, a lack of meaningful metrics or simply the lack of an overarching strategy for safety.
- Many organizations that addressed safety compliance are realizing that their failings are now cultural and that culture can be a powerful influence on safety performance. Failing to deliberately improve safety culture can lead to poor performance in spite of management control efforts.
- Still other organizations fail to adequately address safety in their selection and onboarding of new employees and actually hire and train their future problems. They have been legally limited from traditional and common-sense ways to screen risk-taking employees and have not developed alternative methods to do so.

Regardless of which specific reason or reasons caused poor safety performance, it is inevitable that this reason or these reasons also will affect quality. Business processes are designed to produce products or services. When these processes produce accidental injuries, they have failed.

Cause of Failure

Failures can be caused by human or machine elements or the interface between them. Whatever the cause, management either has failed to properly design or execute the process. When a process produces a product or service of inadequate quality, the process has failed. Process failures are management failures whether they manifest as safety or quality issues. The two are hopelessly intertwined. An organization that performs poorly in safety almost inevitably will have quality problems as well.

The correlation between other outcomes and safety may be less direct, but the potential is undeniable. Leaders who view anything that directly affects workers and their families as low priority will have a negative impact on the organization. The old saying, "Nobody cares how much you know unless they know how much you care," comes to mind. When workers feel that leaders view their personal welfare as a low priority, how can this not affect other facets of organizational performance?

When leaders delegate safety to specialists rather than manage it along with other business priorities, what message does that send? The "real" business leaders manage production and the "safety people" manage safety. Obviously, if safety were really important, leaders would not hand it off to others. Now, what happens when the organization gets quality specialists, HR specialists or other functional personnel? Workers get conflicting messages about the organization's true priorities.

What if the organization gives safety management a good try, but fails? This makes every worker part of a losing team. Safety managers lose respect and workers lose confidence in them. Every positive statement about the organization now has the possible response: "But we failed at safety." Can workers do their best when they are concerned that their own welfare is not being effectively managed?

Gap in Safety Culture

If leaders talk about safety but the safety culture is not supportive, another gap in performance is formed. What leaders say doesn't match "the way we do things around here." Leaders seem out of touch with the reality of the organization, and what they direct doesn't become reality. Could such a gap affect the launch of a new product or service? Could it grow into a clash between leaders and workers? Could it further damage the culture? Such outcomes are not inevitable but certainly are within the realm of possibility.

Even excellent safety cultures can be diluted by the hiring of risk-taking employees. If selection processes are not effective at screening out bold risk-takers, and onboarding processes do not address safety adequately, the pool of workers and the culture is infected. If screening and onboarding is ineffective in safety, is it equally ineffective in other areas, such as work skills, ethics, work practices or cultural fit? Any organization can be infiltrated by new workers and leaders who potentially have a negative impact on overall performance.

So, does poor safety performance necessarily signal other poor practices?

It does not mean that an organization does not do anything else well; but it certainly raises a red flag. Almost any organization can have a temporary flare-up of accidents, and such events should be viewed in context with a longer record of performance. But an organization that consistently produces high levels of worker injuries does so for a reason, or multiple reasons. Anyone wanting to utilize such an organization as a supplier or contractor should investigate other indicators of performance and see if the safety results are isolated or a harbinger of bad performance to come.

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