



Five common problems with your safety strategy

If business strategy is still an evolving concept with new paradigms and approaches established every year, safety strategy has a long way to go to reach extreme levels of effectiveness. Having been hired to review and improve countless corporate safety strategies, I have found five common problems organizations need to overcome to improve both their safety planning and execution.

1. Mostly buzzwords. In many companies, there are phrases like “zero injuries,” “employee engagement,” “world-class safety performance” and “top-tier” that appear to be empty, without meaning, and without a clear plan or roadmap to get there. This results in employees thinking the strategy lacks substance; thus, they have no confidence in the plan.

2. Having a programmatic approach. Rather than thinking through what the needs are, what success looks like, what the destination is, what steps to take or not take, and how to measure value-add, many organizations jump to solutions, programs, training and other initiatives. This results in safety efforts often being

awkward fits for both the company and other business activities. Employees then think safety is nothing more than a series of programs of the month and are unable to understand why choices were made, so support is minimal.

3. Ignoring culture. Efforts primarily focus on incident prevention without considering the gap between the desired and current culture. We know culture is why compliance and excellence efforts succeed or fail. Culture is the ultimate sustainability mechanism of a corporation. This results in an awkward fit and an unnecessary resistance to change.

4. Focusing primarily on failing less. In Terry L. Mathis’ and my 2013 book, “STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence,” we wrote about this common approach to safety strategy: “We call it the ‘Perpetual Cycle of Avoiding Failures.’ It begins with reviewing the incident rate data and setting goals for reducing the incident rates to a new level. This targeted lowering of the failure rate drives the development of initiatives to accomplish the goal. Often the relationship between these initiatives

and the goal is unclear, uncertain or even missing. But a goal necessitates effort to reach it, and programs and other efforts that have safety in the title can create the perception of being aimed at the goal. Even if the initiatives are well designed to achieve the desired improvement, they are not always carried out effectively and often lack process metrics to measure the effectiveness of the effort.”

5. Competing with the business strategy rather than ensuring fit and value-add. Safety will never become a core value within a company culture until the safety strategy is aligned with and supports the business strategy, rather than hindering or constricting it. Believing safety competes with production is outdated thinking. Safety enables profitability and productivity. It provides value. In Mathis’ and my 2016 book, “Inside Strategy: Value Creation From Within Your Organization,” we explain: “Ever since strategy gained currency as an organizational concept in the 1960s, there has been confusion about how to define it. Strategy isn’t a detailed plan of action, nor is it a corporate vision

or an objective or a mission statement. Strategy is not what to think. It’s how to think. Business strategy aims at positioning a company for long-term value creation, profitability, sustainability and growth. Inside strategy’s objective is value creation over time.”

If your safety strategy consists mostly of empty buzzwords, is heavy on new programs, ignores the culture, focuses primarily on failing less and is not integrated into the business strategy, you are not creating sustainable value. It is time to rethink your safety strategy.

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