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How to avoid safety failures

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October 5, 2012

The late business guru, Peter Drucker, warned, “Your system is perfectly designed to give you the results you’re getting.” Injuries and incidents are failures in your systems. Injury prevention tools, culture, strategy, capabilities and focus are part of the elements that make up your systems. Are yours aligned to focus on failing less or achieving success? Both are important, providing different types of organizational performance clarity. However, I’ve yet to see great sustained accomplishments in business, personal life or sporting events obtained by setting and working toward a goal of not screwing up.

Leaders responsible for establishing strategy must move past what I call “The Perpetual Cycle of Avoiding Failures,” outlined in **Figure 1**, to experience different results and performance in safety and culture.

Failure Avoidance Step 1: Review Incident Rate

A leader decides to improve safety. Typically the measurement available to them is their failure metric, the lagging indicator of incident rate. Please recognize this number does not inform how to improve and the average employee is challenged to describe the formula used to determine it. Absent a transformational dashboard or balanced safety scorecard, this becomes the solitary indicator by which safety is measured, goals are established and performance change validated.

Failure Avoidance Step 2: Set a Goal of New Incident Rate

Improvement goals must be set. Too often this becomes a new incident rate number to achieve, sending leadership on a mission to manage to a number. If the goal is negatively defined (zero injuries), people work to avoid. Moreover, this creates the mindset that zero equals excellence in safety. It does not. People then internalize, “If what I do does not produce an incident or injury, it is therefore safe.” This is also not true. Zero incidents is not a continuous improvement goal; it is a failure metric. If the goals are positively oriented (100% safe, 100% of the time, or create safety culture excellence), people work to achieve something.



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Failure Avoidance Step 3: Develop List of Initiatives

Next, leadership develops a list of initiatives with the intentions of accomplishing the new desirable incident rate. Often training, programs, and processes are purchased with the confidence that by performing all of these well, a transformation will occur. But what is the prioritization process that demonstrates confidence in the ability to observe progress toward the goal, as well as confidence that results occurred because of purposeful, focused intent, rather than luck?

Failure Avoidance Step 4: Execute Initiatives

Once the list has been narrowed down and an implementation path has been chosen, resources are focused on executing the activities. Then the cycle begins again. After the initiatives are underway or complete, the incident rate is measured. If there is improvement, an invalidated sense of accomplishment is perceived because, “We took action and the results improved!” Correlation doesn’t always indicate causation.

Avoiding failure is not a strategy

If the goal is excellence in safety culture and performance, your efforts must be focused on achieving more of what you want rather than what you don’t want. Leaders must develop a safety excellence strategy, providing a framework that facilitates appropriate and prioritized decisions to both continuously improve safety culture and prevent accidents. Improving safety, deploying an initiative and achieving zero incidents (failing less) are not strategies; they are goals and objectives. Prior to approving an initiative, the following five questions must be answered:

1. How will doing this demonstrate we are executing our strategy, aligning with our vision and accomplishing the objectives and goals?
2. What precise value does this provide?
3. How will this advance the culture?
4. How will this eliminate these types of accidents, or minimize or control the risk exposure?
5. Different than measurement, how will we observe progress toward accomplishing our goal?

If these questions do not have substantive answers, the “Why are we doing this?” question isn’t answered, support will be undetermined, confidence in leadership ability will be diminished and results will be a gamble.

With the resources to improve safety becoming leaner and leaner, it is imperative that focus becomes the key tool. Continuous improvement is important; however, it is a slow and tedious process without a comprehensive and aligned strategy, transformational focus and confidence in a validated direction.

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