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Innovate or Follow: The Argument Against A Best Practice

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Careless adoption of a best practice may result in placing dangerous blinders on individuals within the organization, ceasing the search for vital fresh approaches. Someone, somewhere, pioneered the approach you are considering. Is your goal to innovate, or follow?

The English writer, Charles Caleb Colton, said, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." The average safety performers imitate; the best create a culture of collaborative innovation within all levels of the organization.

Best practice is often defined as a proven method to accomplish a task in a more efficient and effective manner. The search for sustainable excellence in safety, quality, or any other pillar of operational excellence requires the continuous exploration for a unique, better approach, as all best practices can be improved over time as advancements are identified.

Time Marches On

History teaches us that our collective intelligence will continue to expand. With the exception of a few outlier organizations, remember how most companies managed safety during the 1970s and '80s? Many practices that were once reinforced or tolerated would lead to immediate dismissal or class action lawsuit today.

Is the best practice identified 10 years ago now common among your industry? Moreover, does it continuously provide new gains? If a best practice becomes a common practice, thus average, is it still truly a best practice?

In his book, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices*, Peter Drucker wrote, "Success always makes obsolete the very behavior that achieved it." In today's increasingly competitive global market, we must remain innovative. Many leading executives are realizing safety performance is a competitive advantage, necessitating an unwavering search for a better way to improve safety.

It is necessary to change the context of measurement and definitions of excellence in safety. Definitions of safety have shifted from being described as "the lack of accidents or incidents" to "continuously increasing observable, proactive efforts to control risk exposure resulting in a positive outcome."

In *What Got You Here, Won't Get You There*, Marshall Goldsmith writes, "One of the greatest mistakes of successful people is the assumption, 'I behave this way. I am successful. Therefore, I must be successful because I behave this way.' The challenge is to make them see that sometimes they are successful in spite of this behavior."

Defining and measuring safety by the lack of negative outcomes falls short in identifying if we are safe because of what we do, or in spite of what we do. The characterization of safety should be construed as the combination of applied environmental and behavioral approaches that reduce or eliminate exposure to risk. Regardless of our current societal intelligence and engineering capabilities, we cannot remove all risk exposure. This is today's reality.

Furthermore, all of the effort we currently place in safety, regardless of transformational focus, will eventually reach a point of diminishing returns. Yet we must persist. The late advertising executive, Leo Burnett, once said, "When you reach for the stars, you may not quite get one, but you won't come up with a handful of mud, either."

On May 22, 1932, during an address at Oglethorpe University, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, "The country needs and, unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something."

This was true in 1932 and I believe it still remains true today. For something as critical as safety to both organizations and individuals alike, we must always keep trying. We must not accept a practice and end our search. By internalizing this philosophy, one day others will find themselves in your reception area seeking a better way to improve safety. As they leave, encourage them to take your practices and make them better.

About the Author: *Shawn M. Galloway is the president of ProAct Safety and an adviser to global organizations seeking sustainable excellence in performance. He is also the host of the acclaimed weekly podcast series, "Safety Culture Excellence." Galloway can be reached at 800-395-1347 or info@ProActSafety.com.*

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