



Managing Safety: Is Safety Mandatory or Discretionary?

Many of the organizations with whom we work have a mantra that safety is a condition of employment. Certainly, there are elements of safety that cannot be ignored or bypassed, but does this apply to everything we do for safety?

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If safety is a condition of employment, what about the gray areas where no rules or procedures apply? Are those conditions of employment too? If a worker fails to go above and beyond the basics of safety, is that grounds for dismissal? The way you answer these questions reflects strategic thinking that can have a great impact on the level of safety excellence your organization can reach.

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There is a great deal of emphasis on safety culture these days, but very little understanding of what it is and how to improve it. Many define culture as what happens in the absence of managerial or supervisory control, i.e. "what people do when you are not looking." If this is true, then culture is what happens during the lack of command and control. It could be argued that the goal is self-discipline that continues when controls are not present. But it also could be defined as what happens when workers exercise discretion rather than adhere to control.

So, is there a simple, one-dimensional answer to the question of whether safety is mandatory or discretionary? If you think there is, I would suggest that your answer (and the strategic thinking behind it) likely would become a self-imposed limitation to the level of safety excellence you can achieve. On the other hand, if you are still straddling the fence on your answer, you may be gaining perspective on the complexity of this issue. When you consider some kinds of safety situations in which workers are called on to make workplace decisions, the answer seems simple. In other situations, the answer is not so black and white.

I would like to suggest that the best answer to this question is "yes!" Safety is both mandatory and discretionary depending on the issue. This is not to suggest that every issue is both, but that every issue is either one or the other. Matters of compliance with laws, regulations, company policies and the like are, and should be, mandatory. They should be conditions of employment and should have a low tolerance for non-conformance.

This necessarily does not mean a "one-strike" policy that ignores the human propensity for making occasional "honest" mistakes. But it does mean that levels of performance for these safety issues constantly are reinforced and continuously communicated. Willful, flagrant or repeated violations should be dealt with severely, consistently and in a timely manner. Training for both new employees and ongoing training for existing employees should address these issues and ensure that everyone knows the mandates and how to comply with them.

Greater Possibilities

Above and beyond these mandatory issues lies a fertile field of possibilities for even more excellent safety performance. Ask groups of employees if it is possible to follow all the rules and procedures and wear all required personal protective equipment and still get injured on the job. If (or when) they answer that it is possible, you will have opened the gate to this new field of potential excellence. If you try to identify the opportunities there and make them mandatory, you will close the gate again. Constantly adding more rules and procedures to cover every contingency produces diminishing returns. Even if you could address every possible combination of circumstances, workers could not internalize that many rules and procedures.



It is difficult for some organizations to differentiate between what they demand of their employees and what they would like to encourage; but those that do so in safety almost always reap rich rewards for their efforts. If you demand safety compliance and motivate safety excellence, you are more likely to achieve both. In fact, it is not uncommon for organizations struggling to be in compliance to easily achieve that goal when they aim at excellence. Motivating workers to be their very best in safety assumes that they will be compliant. Compliance usually is a minimal standard for safety that is a "given" for those working towards higher levels of performance.

Just as some organizations find it difficult to divide mandatory from discretionary efforts, many managers and supervisors also struggle with this dichotomy. Many organizational authority figures are entrenched in a style of either command or empowerment. Some are trying to transition from one style to the other. The safety strategy proposed here calls for them to be both. Most management theories call for a transition from cop to coach, from policing to performance building. This strategy says be the cop for compliance and be the coach for excellence. In today's lean environment, it is hard enough to get the job done without dividing it into two parts and managing each in a different way.

Identify Targets

The best method for addressing both organizational and individual resistance to this strategy is to select specific and limited discretionary safety-improvement targets to coach. Specific targets tend to focus workers' efforts and produce both quicker and more sustainable results. They also tend to define the distinction between cop and coach roles for leaders, managers and supervisors. Everyone is expected to enforce and comply with rules and procedures and be motivated and coached to achieve higher levels of excellence in specific, targeted areas.

It is critically important to identify high-impact discretionary targets and limit how many of them are addressed at the same time. Working on low-impact targets is de-motivating when efforts produce little or no results. Working on too much at once clouds the focus and makes it more difficult to see improvement. It also is important to focus on targets within the control of workers, so their contributions can be significant to organizational improvements.

Organizations and leaders who divide safety into the mandatory and discretionary parts tend to progress their safety improvement more rapidly than those who don't. But the dividing isn't the magic; it is learning how to be both cop and coach and when to be each that is the true power of the leadership component. From the workers' perspective, being expected to do the basics and being motivated to go above and

beyond forms a culture of excellence that exceeds anything that a "do-as-you-are-told" culture can ever achieve.



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