

Key Ingredients: What Makes a Safety Strategy Effective

Organizations that tend to outperform others do so with highly engaged employees who feel like they are in the know regarding the company strategy and their evolving role within it.

How effective is your safety strategy? Does it have the key ingredients or is it missing something important?

In 2005 my second daughter was born and, shortly afterwards, baptized. On that day, my wife's parents were in town to celebrate the occasion. Prior to the service, my mother-in-law labored intensively in the kitchen preparing a wonderful meal for later that afternoon. When the time came for us to find ourselves around the table appreciating her hard work, including her homemade chicken salad, I couldn't help but notice a strange look on her face. Several minutes after everything had been served, she started laughing. As we all inquired into what appeared to be an inside joke, she let us in: She had forgotten the chicken. Missing a key ingredient is easy to overlook in something as simple as chicken salad or as complex as a corporate or site-specific safety strategy.

Many companies have goals, programs, and well-defined tactics, but only the best have an effective safety strategy (see the figure below). Regardless of business focus, a strategy is a framework of choices, tradeoffs, and small bets an organization makes to determine how to capture and deliver value. A real strategy defines how to win, not how to fail less. To create a comprehensive safety strategy, several key ingredients are necessary.

Key Ingredients of an Effective Safety Strategy

- Success Defined
- Who Leads and Manages Safety
- Desired Management Style
- Roadmap to Desired Destination
- Selection/Alignment of All Safety Programs
- Measurements of Progress and Value-Add
- Marketing Plan
- Ongoing Communication Plan

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Success Defined. It must be clear who the customer is and what success looks like when it is achieved. This is more than results, for the challenge that follows great results is in knowing precisely how they were accomplished. It must be clear what the destination will look like; otherwise, everyone will be left to individually define what path they take and what it looks like when they arrive. What would be common (i.e., beliefs, behaviors, competencies, knowledge, experiences, language, stories) when great results are sustainable?

Who Leads and Manages Safety. One cannot delegate a core value. If the strategy includes driving safety from a perceived priority to value, it must be defined what the specific injury-prevention and culture-enhancing roles, responsibilities, and observable results are. Do the leaders lead and manage safety, or is it managed by the safety professional?



Desired Management Style.

What is needed from those in leadership positions? Does drastic change need to occur rapidly, or is the goal employee ownership, involvement, and collaboration? What style of management and leadership is needed? A strategy to meet aggressive regulatory compliance is much different than one focusing on a culture of excellence. Styles will evolve but should be situational for what is needed at the moment in time.

Roadmap to Desired Destination.

If people cannot see where the organization is going, what it will look like when they get there, and how to decipher where they are on the journey, expect confusion and minimal discretionary effort.

Selection/Alignment of All Safety Programs. Effective strategy requires there to be fit and alignment among the many activities, goals, and plans of the organization. Safety should never compete with production; it should add value to it and those impacted by the efforts. What programs or activities do you need to start, modify, or stop? What creates the perception of complimentary versus conflicting? Does the safety strategy support or hinder the overall business strategy?

Measurements of Progress and Value-Add. Visible progress toward a goal is a known effective motivator, so ensure your strategy provides it. Further, it must continue to answer the "what's in it for me" question that never goes away. Those impacted by the strategy should be able to name two or three wins from the strategy and how it is specifically benefiting them or their roles personally.

Marketing Plan. For discretionary effort, you must compete for attention; thus, you need a marketing plan. How will you brand your strategy? How will you position that brand? How will you capture the voice of the customer to ensure value-add, and how will you reinforce the decision to buy in afterward?

Ongoing Communication Plan. Communication is a process, not an event; and it is known that one of the major reasons for resistance to change is people don't understand the reason for the change. Organizations that tend to outperform others do so with highly engaged employees who feel like they are in the know regarding the company strategy and their evolving role within it.

A great strategy charts the course and explains where the organization is going, where they are currently against the plan, what it will look like when they get there, what data supported the decisions that were made, and what measurements will provide timely feedback to continue the path, course-correct, and continuously improve. As you work to develop or enhance your safety excellence strategy, make sure it includes these proven, vital ingredients. **OHS**

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