



Overcoming invulnerability to strengthen safety culture

When “it’s not going to happen to me (or us)” becomes the dominating attitude and belief within a safety culture, expect accidents to occur. Further, when they do, anticipate the individuals involved to be surprised and unable to identify the prevention control points.

How great would it be to have a team of supermen and superwomen, doing more than what is required in their jobs, knowing nothing can hinder their ability to succeed? We all want a culture that believes they can accomplish anything and that nothing will stop progress. Dr. Brené Brown of The University of Houston writes, “To reduce our feelings of vulnerability, we wake up every morning, put on our armor and rarely take it off — especially in our work lives. We use invulnerability as a shield to protect us from discomfort, anxiety and self-doubt.”

From one perspective, having a sense of invulnerability (i.e., we can accomplish anything) could be considered a positive cultural characteristic or capability, but not when it comes to operational process and personal safety. Once, when working with a military base to overcome an increase in

low-speed motorcycle fatalities due largely to lack of helmets, the base commander shared with me, “I’m concerned my soldiers have lost their sense of vulnerability.” At the time, these soldiers were all returning from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan unscathed and had recently purchased motorcycles. As a veteran, I too remember that sense of overconfidence and invulnerability as being both an enabler and a hindrance.

While it can be unhealthy and counterproductive in some settings to scare people into safe choices, it is imperative leaders work to create a continued healthy appreciation for risks. While these same leaders are responsible for continuously improving the working conditions, they will never be able to completely eliminate all risks. Leaders, in both safety and operations, must have a strategy to prevent a loss of vulnerability in safety. While it is not the intent of this brief article to share such a strategy (see “STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence”), consider asking and answering the following 10 questions to tease out the opportunities to either overcome or prevent a loss of vulnerability:

1. What is the common definition of

“safe” at your site? In other words, do people define safe as “not getting hurt” or “not at risk”?

2. What systems are in place that involve employees to capture and identify process and personal risk exposure?

3. What leadership-led conversations occur with employees to discuss, tease out and highlight risk exposure?

4. How does your organization measure (high to low) risk exposure, rather than just results?

5. How would employees respond to the question: “What is the most likely thing to get you injured?”

6. Is the answer to the preceding question being addressed and is it correct for their jobs?

7. How effective is near-miss reporting and communication?

8. How well are the story-based lessons learned from prior events communicated and integrated into processes like pre-job briefing/inspections, hazard assessments, job safety audits, pre-startup safety reviews, mock incident drills, behavioral observations, etc.?

9. How well does training focus on hazard identification and an individual’s personal communication and mitigation responsibility?

10. How often are employees discussing and coaching peer safety practices?

Everywhere we go there is always an element of risk; the longevity of life is awarded to those who recognize this. We should instill a confidence in safety, and the systems and processes in place, but we should also realize the limitations of what we know about risk and prevention today. Every year we evolve, and new tactics and interventions emerge. If we think we know all there is to know about risk, we will be surprised by incidents. Only when we realize we are vulnerable can we continuously search for a better way.

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