

Roles in Safety: Often Misunderstood, Rarely Descriptive

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Asking someone to support safety, lead with safety, make safety a way of life, or “own safety”, is never as effective as showing them how to accomplish it and then reinforcing it on a continuous basis.

Organizations throughout the world are on a continuous search for two things: “What determines a great leader who demonstrates safety as a personal core value?” and, “How do we reach the point where employees take personal responsibility for their individual role in safety and risk mitigation?” If only we knew what that looked like!

Too often, organizations place judgment based on the results of individuals, rather than on the actions they have performed to achieve them. Results are the responsibility of those in a leadership position. However, without understanding the difference between effort and luck, the focus can be more on superstition than sustainability. Corporations that are unable to point specifically to what a leader has done to accomplish the outcomes are in a very dangerous position.

Forecasting – a vital exercise carried out by all senior leaders – is an important, time-consuming exercise in predictive analysis. How is one to feel confident in prophesying a group’s safety, quality, or production performance, if they do not know what observable performance is necessary to achieve it, or what it takes to sustain desirable levels? Great leaders, and consultants alike, are no longer analyzed by what they have done; the focus is now on how they did it.

Excellence in any operational category will be difficult to obtain without an understanding of what people do and why they do it. Behaviours are simply what people do, the words you use, the inflection of your voice, your body language, and your work product. Simply put, behaviours are observable actions. The criticality lies in understanding why people do what they do if we are to obtain sustainable performance.

Whether we realize it, or agree with it or not, behavioural approaches are critical to the foundation of safety regulation and legislation. From the executives to new employees, there are things people must do to remain in compliance. Moreover, there are things managers and supervisors must do to lead effectively and demonstrate that safety is more than today’s priority, but a personal value to the individual leader.

Employees, while holding management accountable for providing a safe work place, must also work to keep themselves safe on and off the job. How can we achieve this without a focus on behaviour? The challenge lies in how we go about this often sensitive issue.

There are certain things that are outside your personal responsibility when dealing with safety, similar to employees holding their company responsible for a safe work environment. When I drive my wife and young daughters in and around my community, I hold the local government accountable for safe roads, well-lit signs and appropriate traffic management. I hold the vehicle manufacture accountable for airbags, structural integrity and overall manufacturing quality of the car.

However, I cannot rely on airbags and nice roads when someone unexpectedly pulls out in front of my car. Responding in that situation is my responsibility.

Organizations striving to achieve excellence in any operational category should clearly define the roles, responsibilities and expectations for all job titles and levels within the organization. This is common in the area of quality – so why not safety?

Organizations that have reached a plateau in safety, quality or production performance have done so because specific behaviours are continuously reinforced by the systems and culture to continue to produce the same results. Change the behaviours, and you will change the results.

If you were to walk through your operating environment, what would you see that gives you the feeling that you are heading in the right direction? Not having accidents is, obviously, critical. What do you see that is making “not having accidents” happen?

Most organizations never achieve sustainable excellence in safety culture and performance because they focus on what is undesirable rather than what is desirable. Measure and manage what you *do* want, rather than only what you don't want. If you are a self-driven leader, chances are, you will eventually achieve what you focus on.

Until you define what you want (stated in the observed positive, rather than observed negative), align your systems (i.e. measurement, communication, meetings, hiring, promotions, etc.) and culture (i.e. the way we do things around here, why we do what we do, reinforced expectations, etc.), you will be leading without a sense of what the eventual destination looks like. Sending someone on a path without a clear ability to determine when the goal has been reached is an exercise in futility.



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