

# A Safety Excellence Strategy: The Four Facilitators of Execution

**T**he famed boxer Mike Tyson once quipped, “Everyone’s got a plan until they get punched in the face.” The U.S. Military advises, “All strategies are successful until contact with the enemy, because the enemy hasn’t voted yet.” Strategies are important, but not as important as the planning process that creates them. Moreover, the planning process is vital, but not as significant as the ability to execute against it.

Developing, then executing against strategy is challenging even for the well-prepared. Having worked with some of the best strategy consultants and corporate executives, it is this author’s conclusion that the ability to effectively execute against any excellence strategy requires mastering the four key elements discussed in this article.

## Boundaryless Flow of Information

When an organization masters communication, everything else becomes possible. Some of the beliefs that obstruct the flow of communication are: politics, shoot-the-messenger perceptions, protecting the employees, protecting the boss, “what they don’t know won’t hurt them,” and “I know what is best” mentalities. Between the most senior individual and the lowest on the organizational hierarchy, those that fall in between often do not realize they are being communicated through, not communicated to.

Boundaries, real or otherwise, that hinder the flow of vital information must be sought out and neutralized. Silos and censorship of information destroy the ability to align efforts and make proactive course corrections. Regardless of direction, what percentage of information is censored in your organization? And what percentage of the population acts as censors, seeking out necessary indicators to communicate the effectiveness of plan?

## Decision Rights

Statements such as, “What is my role in this again?” and “Doesn’t she know that is her responsibility?” indicate the roles, responsibilities, and decision rights are not clear. Business author Peter Jacobs writes, “How a company decides who is authorized to make what types of decisions can have a profound effect on its business, both in terms of everyday effectiveness and the bottom line.” Some organizations develop decision maps to help clarify the owners of specific decisions, the thought process, and from whom input must flow.

Decision rights must be developed and then delegated or shared, as few strategies can be carried out without the help of others. Furthermore, strategies that affect culture should not be owned by a department or individual. Safety, as an example, and often core value in organizations, cannot have an excellence strategy developed without the involvement of operational personnel. But what their involvement is and what decisions they are responsible for must be clear.

## Proactive Accountability

Developing decision rights will be a pointless exercise without

proactive accountability. Even among the best in industry, few organizations manage accountability correctly. “Results were not achieved. Who needs to be held accountable?” Sound familiar? Consequences for non-performance are warranted and sometimes vital for a leader’s ability to manage effectively.

Excellent performance will be difficult at best and rarely sustainable if accountability is administered or managed after the fact. Fundamentally, there are two sides to performance management, proactive and reactive. Accountability is no different. In client workshops, Proactive Accountability is defined as “Making sure individuals are doing what is necessary to accomplish the results and providing positive or negative consequences for performance, before checking if results have been obtained.” How would you rate your ability to manage accountability? What percentage of your accountability is proactive versus reactive?

## Visible Progress Toward a Goal

Setting out on any course will quickly become demotivating without constant feedback on progress. One cannot wait for the process to complete to determine whether one went in the right direction. Consider the days where you have worked hard and were able to see progress and felt a sense of accomplishment compared to the days where the same amount of effort was applied and you felt the surface wasn’t even scratched. One of the most effective motivators in a work setting is visible progress toward a goal. How well do you show visible progress of your strategy deployment or toward your overall goal?

First, consider: Does your goal send the message to fail less? If your strategy is based on a goal of fewer injuries, defects, or complaints, this is precisely the message sent. Failure reduction goals rarely create a sustained sense of motivation. Success goals and progress indicators that show movement toward continuous improvement sends the message we are getting better, rather than failing less.

Second, what are the indicators of progress and how are these indicators used to demonstrate advancement toward the goal? When visible progress is appropriately communicated, this reinforces that information is flowing freely to help the right people make the right decisions and facilitates proactive accountability.

Excellence is the ability to duplicate and sustain success. Strategies to achieve this desirable outcome will be elusive if the information flow is compromised, decision rights are vague, proactive accountability is absent, or the motivational impact of visible progress is forgotten. Without these facilitators of execution, luck will be a more important factor than you realize. **OKS**

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