



# Safety measurement: Boring, uninspiring and fear-inducing

**W**hat excites and inspires you? Probably the first thing that entered your mind was not safety measurement. Why is something this important perceived as such a boring topic, and why does it create so much fear?

The purpose of safety measurement is to focus and align behaviors, initiatives and processes and most importantly, to excite people about safety and the important role it plays in work. Yet many organizations do a poor job at selling its importance and demonstrating measurable positive progress toward the right goals. Based on my experience with enhancing executive measurement systems, I offer some simple questions designed to prompt internal conversations to better your measurement systems.

**Question 1:** What would your goals look like if they were stated in the positive? Surprisingly, even now, some of the best safety-performing organizations state their goals incorrectly. They define the desirable end-state in safety as having fewer or zero injuries, incidents or hurt people. Goals need to be positively

defined if we want to inspire excitement around achieving it. Incidents are failures in your system.

**Question 2:** Do you want employees to fail less or succeed at accomplishing something? No one of sound mind designs their safety management systems to expect incidents. Similarly in quality, we do not design our processes to expect defects. If or when they occur, they are failures. When we define our goals as having fewer failures, we send the message, "Work harder this year to fail less." Goals need to be defined by what you want people to do, rather than not do. Otherwise, you will create a culture focused on avoidance, rather than one focused on achievement through effort.

**Question 3:** How much of your safety measurement communication is focused on what you don't want, compared to what you do? In my experience, the vast majority of safety meetings where safety measurements or information is shared with the employee population, more attention is placed on discussing what is not wanted, rather than on what is. Consider

discussing a near miss; focus just as much time discussing what kept it a near miss (and not an injury) as the time you spend discussing what occurred leading up to it.

**Question 4:** Can you directly correlate performance and results? While autonomy is important, there needs to be an aligned focus on performance in safety to achieve excellent results. When results are achieved, if we do not know what performance made it a reality, there will be a decreased sense of comfort in the ability to repeat year after year.

**Question 5:** Do you communicate more about results or the performance necessary to achieve the results? When we only measure and manage results, even the best intentioned people might use manipulation to achieve the results. Certainly the results are vital. In fact, we are all held accountable for results. However, when this is all that is discussed, we leave too much to the discretion of individuals to self-determine what is necessary to reach the results.

**Question 6:** How much creative input do those being measured have in the system? If we do not involve people in the

determination of what, how, when, where and why we are measuring what we measure, expect a degree of fear or mistrust. If we want others to be excited about safety

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measurement, they need to understand the rationale and see how it benefits them personally and professionally.

If we desire enhanced performance and results, we need to change what, how and why we measure. This is not something that can be purchased from a vendor. Rather, it results from difficult and collaborative internal conversations. If we continue to fail to do this, safety measurement will continue to be boring, uninspiring and fear-inducing.

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