



# Safety strategy: Is your safety professional a grunt or guru?

**S**afety professionals play many roles (e.g., trainer, enforcer, coach, adviser, facilitator, consultant). We have all had days where we oscillated between them all. Eventually, to advance the safety capabilities and maturity of the organizations they support, safety professionals must move from being a doer, enabling others to take on the responsibilities. The safety professional then becomes an adviser, setting the vision and influencing progress toward it.

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Advisers are more than technical experts; rather, they are individuals able to see the bigger picture and help others see the value in making the right decisions, in support of the needed direction. This requires advisers to not only have a firm grasp on safety improvement possibilities but also the business reality they will be

implemented within.

As pointed out in “STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence,” safety culture is a part of organizational culture and should not be managed independently. Moreover, the business tools that serve industry so well to dominate market share can and should be used to dominate the attention share, a measurement of cultural focus. Strategically thinking safety professionals recognize the need to move from grunt, to guardian, to guru within their own organizations.

A grunt is a person performing the specific tasks for others (i.e., lead this safety meeting). Guardians oversee the grunts and others (e.g., supervisors, operations managers, contractors) who perform the efforts that were previously owned and carried out solely by the grunts. The gurus become the subject matter experts, offering counsel to shape the business and individual decisions that drive the performance and culture within organizations. Becoming a guru necessitates moving the thinking from tactical to strategic and formulating a safety business plan in collaboration with business leaders to ensure fit and practicality.

Since the first use of strategy within business operations in the 1960s, organizational leaders have worked diligently to identify and continuously improve their strategic planning process, ensuring the proactive prioritization of focus and resources that result in the ability to accomplish forecasting confidently. However, as Helmuth von Moltke, a 19th century Prussian Army leader, wisely observed, “No battle plan ever survives first contact with the enemy.” Successful organizations develop key performance indicators to monitor the progress of the executed strategy to ensure progress in the intended direction.

Different than activity-based measurements, performance measurements help an organization not only see if they are staying the course but also provide the insight zero-based indicators miss when used alone. When great results are obtained, confidence should encompass the safety leader when providing the forecasting business leaders require of the three- to five-year strategic safety plan.

Without a clear vision for safety excellence, data-driven and proactively priori-

tized objectives and measurements of both progress and results, organizations will remain with grunt-like safety professionals, diligently overseeing the implementation of program after program. Certainly there is value for these types of individuals. However, if safety improvement means searching for the next program, this demonstrates tactical thinking and will hinder the ability to evolve past being “good” in safety. Fundamentally, it comes down to answering the important, yet telling, question, “Do we want to be excellent in safety or get a little better next year?” This will determine the level of thinking needed in your safety professional.

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