

Safety Strategy: What great leaders do well

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Occasionally, some of the greatest truths in business are found not only in the musings of great business leaders, but also in the creative genius of authors of fiction. Consider the exchange between the characters Alice and the Cheshire Cat of Lewis Carroll's novel, *Alice in Wonderland*. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat. "I don't much care where—" said Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat. "— so long as I get SOMEWHERE," Alice added as an explanation. "Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

Activities Follow Strategy

The popular paraphrasing that's followed this famous fictional dialogue, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will get you there," holds great truth and is often found within many organizations when goals are set to improve both safety performance and culture. It is typical for a well-intentioned leader to begin attempting to improve safety by focusing on the tactics, activities and methodology, without first determining what results they should provide and how progress will be measured.



Most of ProAct Safety's client organizations, who are already leaders in their industry for safety performance, do not recognize sustainable improvement resulting from more meetings, activities and mandates, and realize that more of the same rarely brings change. With fewer resources and increasing competitiveness in operational priorities, it is imperative organizations remain strategically focused on both the overarching strategic framework that prioritizes decisions, and on the minutia of choosing the precise intervention proactively, and aggressively monitoring measurements that provide insight into progress.

Worthy Metaphors

In *Zoom In, Zoom Out*, Rosabeth Moss Kanter of Harvard Business School writes, "The lens through which leaders view the world can help or hinder their ability to make good strategic decisions, especially during a crisis. Zoom in, and get a close look at select details - perhaps too close to make sense of them. Zoom out, and see the big picture - but perhaps miss some subtleties and nuances. Zoom buttons on digital devices let us examine images from many viewpoints. They also provide an apt metaphor for modes of strategic thinking."

Another metaphor worth considering comes from Roger L. Martin of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto. In *The Execution Trap*, Martin writes of how the corporation can be conceived of as "a white-

water river in which choices cascade from the top to the bottom. Each set of rapids is a point in the corporation where choices could be made, with each upstream choice affecting the choice immediately downstream. Those at the top of the company make the broader, more abstract choices involving larger long-term investments, whereas the employees toward the bottom make more concrete, day-to-day decisions that directly influence customer service and satisfaction.”

Zoom In on the Customers of Safety

How improvement objectives are prioritized and executed determines not just sustainability of results, but buy-in as well. Leaders need both the zoom in and zoom out capability as well as an understanding that the decisions to improve safety will be carried out by others and often impact other business priorities. When Martin writes of how the day-to-day decisions influence customer service and satisfaction, consider that employees of all levels, contractors and vendors included, are customers in safety.

Do they see the value in, and rationale of, the improvement direction that often results in additional responsibilities, activities and paperwork? Strategies are rarely executed well when those involved are operating under the mentality of have-to. If these customers of ours are not informed and enabled to zoom out to see the big picture (i.e., what does safety excellence look like and how this contributes toward it), can we expect to solicit more than compliance behavior?

What Great Leaders Do

Great leaders choose an improvement direction after it is clear to them and those who support it precisely where they are going. They do not get disrupted by nor react to events with new programs. They have a dual, proactive-prioritization strategic framework that justifies and validates return on investment of initiatives, aligned to prevent incidents and injuries, and continuously mature the culture. Strong, proactive, positive accountability systems are in place to enhance the leaders' role in soliciting discretionary performance, challenging status-quo thinking and managing the experiences, story-telling and beliefs within the culture.

Finally, great leaders are not satisfied with great results. They measure both leading (i.e., activities) and transformational (i.e., performance progress) indicators to validate and create confidence in the lagging indicator results. When transformational results are reached, there is unquestionable and shared conviction in the ability to repeat and continuously improve. Great leaders not only achieve Zero Injuries, but Sustainable Safety Culture Excellence as well. **LE**

References

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