

## Stop Making It Difficult To Be Excellent in Safety

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Leadership is hard; cultures are complex. Even when managers acquire new skills that will enable them to transition from managing to leading, it doesn't guarantee they will make the change. Similarly, changing a culture and improving safety performance with new programs, processes, and tools provides no guarantee that sustainable results will be recognized. Rather than starting with a new process, when a certain point of safety improvement is reached, there should be a concentrated effort to first determine what processes should cease or be discontinued.

Once the decision has been made to improve safety, where does one begin? Should the focus be placed on addressing and fixing weaknesses, or build off of strengths? Should you first strive to understand and change any negative perceptions in your culture and what drives them, or build upon and perpetuate positive beliefs? Excellence in any operational category does not result from an exclusive focus on any one element. Strengths need to be nurtured and facilitated, and weaknesses need to be managed or neutralized.

A culture's weaknesses often prevent the strengths from emerging or expanding. This weak-link theory holds true for not just a team's capabilities, but also the effectiveness of its leader. Furthermore, a leader's weakness can compromise the growth of the collective strengths of others. Everyone and every culture has strengths and weaknesses. While both play an equal role in the journey to sustainable excellence, often more opportunities lie with a focus on what to stop doing, than on what to start.

The late management expert, Peter Drucker, once famously wrote, "We spend a lot of time teaching our leaders what to do. We don't spend enough time teaching them what to stop." Rather than a continuous search for what else could be done, pause and first focus on what you need to stop doing that is making it difficult for people to excel. This direction is not intended simply for those currently moving from (to borrow Jim Collin's term), "Good to Great." There is a lesson here for everyone, regardless of your starting point or the maturity of your systems or culture.

Most people desire to feel a sense of accomplishment and also feel they have contributed personally to desirable results. Rather than incentivizing for required or additional performance, work to understand what might be demotivating the performer. Incentives and other motivational schemes can and have been situationally appropriate. However, often the best thing a leader can do is stop making it difficult for employees to be involved, and become interested and engaged in the goal of safety excellence.

Prompting behavior to occur with "have-to" reasoning is rarely sustainable and easily influenced by other motivators. Effective leaders seek to understand the rationale used to make behavioral choices and the powerful pull of motivators and demotivators. High performance leaders recognize the *results* they are responsible for are important, but place a greater degree of importance on *performance* when communicating with directs.

When a leader takes responsibility for the highly leverage-able cultural variables of beliefs, behaviors, and decisions that occur in the organization, you can expect to get great performance that creates great results. You can either manage the conforming stories that are told throughout your organization, or the leader's ability to be successful will be managed by them. Changing beliefs can often create more sustainable results than a change in programs. Your culture is your most effective sustainability mechanism. It is the culture that will either support or resist the new approach due to these existing, or changing, beliefs.

Most organizations employ well-intentioned individuals with good work ethics and a willingness to do more. Rather than first seeking out methods to prompt the desirable beliefs, behaviors, decisions, and stories, obtain an understanding of what is creating them in the first place. What is currently occurring that is making it difficult or impossible for these variables to be exclusively positive? What are the demotivators?

To facilitate the change in beliefs for leaders in your organization, consider leading your next safety improvement discussion with the following three questions:

1. What behaviors would demonstrate that people are contributing and/or supporting safety and our path towards excellence?
2. What do we currently do to motivate and recognize these behaviors?
3. What are we currently doing to demotivate these behaviors?

If a discussion is led with a cross-section of individuals from differing levels in the organization, the transformative opportunities to reduce demotivators, *then* add motivators, will become surprisingly visible. Not only will you create the desired motivational pull to want to be involved in safety, you will be viewed as a leader who listens before acting. While these suggestions might appear as conventional wisdom, consider your organization: how often is it common practice?