

Sustainability Begins With a Transformational Focus

Regrettably, I confess. I have helped contribute to an undesirable perception within safety, often referred to as “Program of the Month.” As leaders, we are held accountable for the decisions we make, the organizations we restructure, the programs we purchase, the people we hire, the teams we create and the results that are expected. The demand for early recognizable results persuades us to look for quick wins. As a result, we often find ourselves shooting first and asking questions later.

To begin the path toward sustainable safety excellence, we must understand the impact that our definition of safety excellence has on our culture.

This ready, fire, aim approach has led many of us to implement safety programs without truly understanding the organizational dynamics that determine sustainability, which is what we are after in the first place. To ensure that change is effective, we must realize that our culture is the most effective sustainability tool. If you are to be successful at change, make sure you have taken steps to ensure that change is anchored in the culture.

Change is a journey and to be successful on that journey, one must navigate. The first principle of navigation is not, “Where do we want to go?” It is, “Where are we right now? What is our starting point?” This is recognized by many of us as common sense. Unfortunately, common sense is not always common practice. So, in practice, cultures are rarely assessed and often ignored, creating a failure before the proposed change has begun.

Experience teaches us that projects do not fail in the end; they fail in the beginning. If we are honest with ourselves, we will recognize that we have effectively created the program-of-the-month, or program du-jour, perception that is prominent throughout the world. Globally, we try new things in safety with expectations for a quick return on investment (ROI). When things do not quickly produce ROI, we stop them and try something else. Is it any wonder when promoting new programs or processes that someone in the audience could be heard whispering, “How long will this last?” and another replies with, “This too shall pass?”

We often find that this skepticism or cynicism is felt by many who are not involved in the decisions on how to make the changes fit the organization. Worse, they are given the impression that they will need to change their

organizations to fit the change. Patrick Lencioni once said, “People do not really buy in on a decision if they do not weigh in on it first.” It is hard to be accepting of change when you are viewed more as the target of change, rather than as a collaborator. Moreover, it is often difficult to get people excited about new initiatives when the culture is in a state of uncontrollable change fatigue.

Oscar Wilde once said, “Consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative.” To consistently do the same thing over and over again and expect new results is, indeed, the behavioral definition of insanity, is it not? Certainly we should keep things fresh by trying new things and by raising awareness around recent discoveries. Furthermore, we should never stop attempting the unknown to keep our employees injury-free and not at-risk. However, if we are to be successful, our basic approach has to change.

BEGIN WITH THE DEFINITION IN MIND

To begin the path toward sustainable safety excellence, we must understand the impact that our definition of safety excellence has on our culture. Over many years, we have mistakenly defined safety as not getting hurt or being injury/damage-free. Do we define healthy as the absence of major disease? At the time of this article, my father is in relatively good shape. He eats well and gets plenty of exercise. However, and unfortunately, he is battling a disease for the second time. This is a disease that cannot be detected by self perceptions of health, or even the human eye. This horrible disease is prostate cancer. When visiting the doctor for a normal checkup and the doctor asks, “How do you feel?” we will respond with, “I feel great, I am healthy!” The doctor will often respond in some sort of congratulatory manner, then propose to assess our risk factors. Our blood pressure will be checked, and fluid samples will be taken to then validate this perception of health.

Now consider how that skewed definition of safety can be dangerously internalized in the minds of our workforce. “If we say that safety means not getting hurt, then anything that I do that does not get me hurt must be . . . safe?” Worse, the way we measure safety excellence perpetuates this. We define our desired state as the absence of the undesirables (accidents or equipment damages). As we progress without an incident, we will hang signs and update digital displays that say XXX days without a lost time or recordable event. Does this mean we are safe or are a few of those days lucky? How do we know beyond

our own perceptions? Like physicians recommend, are we assessing our safety risk factors?

Luck is the result of chance. Realistically, who would not like to be lucky from time to time? Luck may be the strategy when the goal is to win the lottery; however, it is limited when attempting to establish a legacy of excellence. To be lucky is often to stumble into success. Unfortunately, this strategy lacks a foundation to build repeatable and sustainable performance. bit of both has taken me to my successes in life as an international speaker and global consulting firm president. I leave you with my final thought: if i stumble into it, great! But what actions do I repeat to achieve again?

FOCUSED ENERGY

Most companies throughout the modern world have experienced a downward trend in accident rates over the past 20 to 30 years, thus achieving a level of performance improvement not previously possible. To accomplish this, management systems were created, procedures were written, rules communicated and hazards identified then eliminated. In addition, many of these companies have advanced to the creation of hourly led teams or committees that represent the areas of the population with the sole purpose of directing energy on safety improvement. Yet, accidents still occur. So this causes many of us to question, “What are we focusing on in safety?” and “Are they the things that would have the biggest impact?”

Incremental continuous improvement took us from bad to good in safety. Only transformational focus can take us from good to excellent. The vast majority of organizations today do not experience a new step-change in safety improvement by simply increasing the energy in safety. In the

past, this was an accepted approach: throw resources at it and it will go away. Unfortunately, this strategy no longer provides the return necessary to justify the investment. Moreover, most organizations are assessing all areas of operation through the lens of efficiency. If it is not efficient, if it is not lean, it will not be sustainable. Peter Drucker said, “There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.” Most teams can solve most problems, but are they solving the right ones?

With the increasing necessity to do more with less and the technological ability of cloning still in the far off future, we must assess where and what to focus our safety improvement efforts on. A transformational focus will increase in criticality as the resources available to us continue to dwindle.

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Specific Safety Variables

- Time of Day
- Day of Week
- Week of Month/Year
- Month of Year
- Shift
- Hours Worked
- Location
- Department
- Task Performed
- Routine/Nonroutine Task
- Experience with Task
- Number of Individuals on Task
- Tenure with Company
- Training
- Type of Employee
- Type of Clothing Worn
- Procedures
- Languages Spoken
- Miles Driven
- Experience with Task
- Precautions
- Machinery Involved
- Weather Patterns
- Temperature
- Production Schedule
- Influencers (Personal, Organizational, Conditional, Cultural)

TRANSFORMATIONAL PARETO OPPORTUNITIES

We are often engaged to work with organizations that have improved safety beyond the ability to respond to accident data trends. As an organization improves in safety, the accident frequency diminishes. While this is indeed a desired outcome, before they reach and sustain zero, an unfortunate thing often occurs. The accident data will reach a low plateau then lose its statistical significance. The few remaining data points result in the data no longer providing opportunities to respond with a sense of comfort, that taking action will prevent future occurrences.

Safety professionals already use the techniques of Pareto Analysis to determine trends in body type injured, sever-



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ity and types of injuries, to name a few. With effective analysis techniques that provide thorough, detailed accident/incident findings, transformation opportunities are often identifiable. At some point, most organizations will realize the limitations of reported data and advance to approaches that sample common practice. Depending on the culture and trust levels within the organization, a collaboratively defined observation strategy can be created by representatives of the organization. Gathering information on some of the variables through targeted common practice observations offers additional proactive insight into understanding the influencers on risk. Furthermore, in practice, this approach has helped identify transformational opportunities to predict and prevent exposure to risk, both in safety and quality.

Drucker also said, "Success always makes obsolete the very behavior that achieved it. It always creates new realities." We have seen some organizations that identify a transformational focus that spans many years addressing issues that are deeply entrenched in their organization and not easily solved. Recognizing improvements in the safety aspect of your culture and experiencing transformational success need not take multiple years. We have seen hundreds of locations that are able to achieve quick success and change their transformational focus on a quarterly basis.

The goal here is not to change your focus as often as possible. The goal is to assess and see if the focus needs to be changed by responding to gathered insight. A transformational focus is constantly measured and adjusted, thus creating a proactive safety continuous-improvement loop. The visibility from such recognizable rapid success is often the element that provides the energy and enthusiasm needed to motivate the culture and create the critical results orientation. Furthermore, in practice, this has created a sense of permanence and stability of the transformational approach.

END WITH THE BEGINNING IN MIND

Our firm has worked with passionate and intellectually gifted individuals throughout the world. What should

be understood is that not all of these individuals were executive leaders. Many were highly skilled hourly workers. We must recognize that passion for excellence among hourly workers is not only due to a desire for great organizational metrics; it is a personal quest. By continuously conversing with the workforce, one will recognize that the best ideas for safety improvement are abundantly and internally available.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery proposed, "If you want to build a ship, then do not drum up men to gather wood, give orders and divide the work. Rather, teach them to yearn for the far and endless sea." Do we want to work towards creating a sense of intrinsic motivation for excellence in safety, or do we want people to simply comply? Unfortunately, the way some companies implement change sends the latter message. Safety excellence is not achieved through mindless compliance or mindless enforcement.

CONCLUSION

I believe that achieving a level of operational excellence in any category, (i.e., production, quality, safety, etc.) must be largely internally driven. While there can be great benefits from strategically leveraging an external subject matter expert, there is no programmatic change one can purchase or plug-in that ensures sustainable excellence. Nor are there prescription plans predefined by external parties that accomplish this goal. Achieving and sustaining safety excellence is only accomplished through internal passion for the journey. With the continuous pressure of hypercompetitive priorities, this individual passion for excellence at all levels is the only thing that will truly sustain the foundation we work hard to create.

Remember, this is a journey. Culture change, continuous improvement, a results orientation; all of these are a journey, not a process. Continue to assess that first principle of navigation by asking, "Where are we right now?" and "Are we focusing on the most important things that can help us improve in safety? Moreover, what one thing, if we effectively communicated this month, would have the biggest impact on helping our employees reduce their exposure to the inevitability of life's risks?"

If your employees, or even their family members, are injured at home, they are just as absent as if they were injured at work. Considering that, what memorable, repeatable strategies can we provide our employees, which if they internalized and shared with their families, would help everyone remain risk-free at work, home and throughout life? This is a transformational personal safety focus. What is yours? ☺

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