



## **Sustainability: Keeping Safety from Backsliding**

EHS Today – August 2010

Terry L. Mathis

The only thing more difficult than improving safety is making the improvements sustainable. So often, the gains we make today are undone by tomorrow's priorities, forgotten commitments, or are simply lost in the overwhelming demands of life and job. Safety seems like a great weight we are pushing up a hill that is constantly trying to slide back every time we quit pushing. However, there are a few simple techniques that can make all our efforts last longer and thus reduce the need to constantly start over or backtrack. These sustainability techniques can not only improve the life span of safety improvement efforts, but improve the effectiveness of them as well. Four sustainability techniques that have been successful at making safety gains more permanent are discussed below.

### Making Communication Sticky

Have you ever attempted to communicate a safety message (new policy, lesson learned, best practice, etc.) and found almost no one could remember it when asked? Have you ever told someone how to do something and found they really didn't "get" the message and went quickly back to doing it their old way? Workers often cannot recall topics of safety meetings they attended the day before, or details of the last accident at the site, when interviewed.

The Heath brothers' recent book, *Made to Stick*, has some great techniques to make communication more "sticky" or memorable. Obviously, forgotten communication is no better than communication not delivered. The book suggests five strategies for improving the stickiness of communication and several of them can be readily used to improve safety communication. For example, relating accident reports in story form or putting accident statistics into categories and totals can make both more memorable.

In a recent safety assessment, workers were asked what types of accidents happened most often. They were either unable to answer or were completely incorrect in their responses. Even though they could remember several accidents in detail, they had not mentally tabulated the most often experienced accident types from the accident reports they received over the course of the year. Their efforts toward safety lacked an accurate focus. They were not guarding themselves against the accidents most likely to happen to them. Organizations with excellent safety not only tabulate accident types, but also worker precautions most likely to prevent these accidents. This minor enhancement in communicating accident data can produce a large improvement in focusing worker attention on the most effective accident prevention strategies. (see podcast "Making Communication Sticky" at [www.SafetyCultureExcellence.com](http://www.SafetyCultureExcellence.com))

### Making Training Behavioral

Have you ever conducted a training class and found on your next visit to the shop floor that virtually no one was doing the task the way they were just trained? Have you ever cringed when the OSHA inspector asked your workers to cite the last training or a regulation covered by training? In most interviews, workers can rarely cite an objective for training they attended.

Many training modules have no stated objective. Some training modules have objectives, but those objectives use terms such as "learn", "understand", and "appreciate." To be sustainable, all training should have behavioral objectives and standards, such as: attendee "will be able to perform\_\_\_(task) by

\_\_\_\_(target date) to the level of \_\_\_\_ (standard of performance).” Training that is aimed at action is more likely to result in action. It is also more easily tracked and its effectiveness is measured in terms of performance in the workplace. Even the OSHA and MSHA required yearly refreshers can be aimed at improvements in specific areas (see article: Training: A Golden Opportunity, Terry L. Mathis, ISHN, June 2004). Behavioral training is more interesting and memorable and allows practice in a classroom setting that directly translates to practice in the shop or field. The use of behavioral objectives allows the training to be more directly targeted at workplace tasks and realities. Workers do not have to translate classroom theories into workplace practice, so the transfer of training is easier and more complete.

#### Adding Expectations to Roles and Responsibilities

Have you ever had a person defend their lack of results by quoting their roles and responsibilities, and telling how they “went through the motions” of doing them? Have you wondered how individuals lose their results orientation? Do you have people in your organization who seem to mistake effort for results?

Organizations sometimes write specific roles and responsibilities (often called R&Rs) for workers in safety. Clearly defining what a worker’s job should be (roles) and what a worker should do (responsibilities) can help define workplace behavior and eliminate ambiguity. However, R&Rs lack an important element: results orientation. Adding one more step can make sure that this omission does not occur. Add “expectations” to the R&Rs to make RREs.

Expectations link desired results to targeted actions. With RREs, workers know not only what to do but what their actions should accomplish. Failure to accomplish “Expectations” should result in a modification of how one approaches the roles. It is no longer acceptable to simply go through the motions when expectations are not being met. The net result is to change from an activity to a results focus.

#### Keeping Change Bite-Sized

Have you ever started an improvement project expecting people to get excited about the planning and potential of your project and found, instead, that they were de-motivated and feeling overloaded? Have you ever measured the results of a change initiative and found that only a fraction of it was moving in the right direction?

Some change initiatives fail because they attempt to change too much, too fast. There is an old Chinese saying, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” Breaking change down into smaller bites is almost always the answer. Smaller change is easier to sell and easier to buy into. Minimizing the magnitude of change also minimizes the resistance to change and the feeling of overload. Smaller change also has the advantage of quick wins and momentum. Even a massive change effort that requires management of change (MOC) professionals can be divided into bite-sized pieces and made more palatable to the whole organization. Remember the old saying about how to eat an elephant? (One bite at a time!)

#### Conclusion

Safety improvement requires a lot of effort and it is unfortunate when the effort doesn’t produce a lasting effect. Of all the techniques that have been used to for safety-improvement sustainability, these are four that stand out as highly effective. Try these four techniques to improve your communication, training, RREs, and change efforts, and see if the results are not only greater, but more sustainable.

---

Terry L. Mathis is the founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, and was recently named one of the 50 Most Influential EHS Leaders by EHS Today. As an international expert and safety culture practitioner, he has worked with hundreds of organizations customizing innovative approaches to achieve and sustain safety culture excellence. He has spoken at numerous company and industry conferences, and is a regular presenter at NSC, ASSE PDC, and ASSE SeminarFest. He can be reached at 800-395-1347 or [info@proactsafety.com](mailto:info@proactsafety.com).