



The Perceptions that Shape Safety Excellence

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Tue, 2013-06-04 08:11

To achieve excellent safety performance, safety leaders must manage more than behaviors and risk – they also need to manage perceptions.

Over the past two and a half decades, safety in many organizations has focused on worker behavior. We realized how powerful workers are in preventing accidents, even ones they don't cause. We directly worked on behaviors while somewhat minimizing or ignoring some of the factors that impact or influence behavior. As our attention turns from safety-related behaviors to safety culture, we realize that perceptions are crucial to achieving excellent safety performance.

See Also: [Workplace Safety Management Best Practices](#)

Likewise, certain misconceptions can block the path to excellence in safety culture. The management of perceptions will be one of the skills organizations will need to achieve excellent performance in years to come.

So, what are the misconceptions and perceptions most crucial to excellent safety cultures, and how do we manage them? Let's address these three issues in order, beginning with the misconceptions that most commonly have an adverse impact on safety culture and performance.

Common Misconceptions

We already are good at safety – Improvement requires effort, and effort requires motivation. If workers or leaders think they already are good enough at safety, what is the motivation to improve? The idea of "good enough" is the antithesis of continuous improvement. When the organization has multiple priorities, it tends to focus on its problem areas and redirect efforts when the performance improves to an acceptable level.

It won't happen to me – When employees have worked accident-free for a period of time, they assume that continuing to do the job in the accustomed manner will continue to guarantee their safety. This assumption can be valid if there are no low-probability risks or other variables that put them at risk. Measuring safety by lagging indicators drives this perception. If safety is "not having an accident," then anything you do that doesn't get you hurt must be "safe." This thinking ignores risks that don't always result in accidents. As long as the risk is there, accidents can happen to the workers regardless of their perceptions.

It doesn't matter what I do; when my number is up, my number is up – This thinking indicates what psychologists call an "external locus of control." People who fail to see the connection between their actions and the results created by them tend to think someone or something else decides the outcome of events. Obviously, if you are not in control of outcomes, it does not matter how you do your job or what risks you take.

Achieving zero accidents is an impossible goal – Most people don't attempt what they consider to be impossible. If you think accidents are inevitable, why try to prevent them? Likewise, if you think your actions can potentially prevent some but not all accidents, you tend to stop short of the zero goal. Such thinking can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Power of Perception

Some perceptions necessary for safety culture and performance excellence are:

All accidents are preventable – The key to this concept is to understand the process of events that produces an accident. In general, workers who think all accidents are not preventable are only thinking about the final seconds before the accident occurred. Workers begin to see how all accidents can be prevented when they think of events leading up to (upstream from) the accident. It is important to differentiate between preventable and prevented. If we fail to catch the chain of events early enough, we may fail to prevent the accident. Teaching workers to think upstream and look for control points is an excellent way to mentally prepare them for world-class safety performance.

I am always vulnerable to accidents and more so when I am not on guard – The more dangerous the work, the more vulnerable workers feel. The real challenge is maintaining that sense of vulnerability during routine and mundane tasks that don't seem dangerous. This especially is difficult when the site has had a long period since the last accident and there are no stories circulating to enhance the sense of risk.

Safety is a team effort and we all can help and be helped – Almost every worker is motivated to look out for him or herself. The challenge is to get workers cooperating and collaborating on safety issues. Teamwork can create synergy and greatly multiply the effectiveness of safety efforts. It also is a great culture builder, which makes it sustainable for long periods of time with minimal effort from management.



Zero accidents IS possible and nothing less than zero is

acceptable – In quality, many organizations strive for Six Sigma quality. No number of defects can be acceptable in safety! On one hand, this seems like perfectionism, but if the organization develops an acceptable level of accidents, it will never reach zero. Zero doesn't mean perfection so much as it means efforts will not be reduced at any level short of zero, and even then, ongoing effort is required to stay at zero.

I know the most likely accidents that can happen to me and the precautions that can prevent them – Excellence requires the proper focus, and most organizations don't have it. It is crucial for workers to know what type of accidents are happening most often and what precautions can prevent them.

Managing Perceptions

Some common ways to manage perceptions include:

Sharing data – Many misconceptions begin in the dark. When the organization fails to share the pertinent data about safety, workers speculate and communication grapevines grow. The more constant and effective the flow of official information, the smaller the grapevine and the fewer the misconceptions.

Telling stories that illustrate the concept – It is more difficult to argue with an example than with a concept. Telling stories of workers who effectively prevented accidents or sites that hit zero accidents last year can be far more effective than generalizations.

Modeling by managers and supervisors – To achieve safety excellence, organizational leaders must practice what they preach. Leaders who believe in and communicate the perceptions needed for excellence and constantly debunk the misconceptions shape the safety culture.

Excellent performance requires excellent perceptions. Perceptions can be managed. Organizations that can target the desired perceptions and drive out the most harmful misconceptions are the ones that form excellent safety cultures.

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