

## The Pluses and Minuses of Safety

Do you have a positive or negative approach to safety? Your answer could determine how successfully you manage safety and risk.

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Do you think of safety as something that needs to be added to your organization or as something that is accomplished when you remove risks? Do you spend more of your time getting people to do things or to not do things? Is safety the absence of accidents, the control of risks or something else? The way you think about safety will impact the actions you take and your actions will determine your degree of success. The actions that tend to follow a positive approach to safety differ in some important ways from the actions that are typically used in a negative approach.

The negative approach to safety actually is the most common. Safety is defined as not having an accident and the way to not have an accident is to eliminate hazards and not take risks. The focus is on what the risks are and who is taking them. Hazards are removed from the workplace when possible and controlled to the extent that they are controllable. When workers are caught taking risks, actions must be taken to stop the risk-taking behavior. Even positive activities such as safety training and safety meetings tend to focus on awareness of what not to do. Safety metrics are the failure rates of frequency and severity of accidents and success is defined as failing less frequently and/or less severely.

Removing hazards from the workplace is effective to a point and then tends to produce diminishing returns. Most organizations have been addressing workplace hazards for years. There always are more hazards, but at some point, organizations have to prioritize where they will expend their resources to further improve their safety performance. When they reach a point where each new fix gets progressively more expensive and produces progressively less improvement, they tend to turn toward the human elements of safety versus the conditional elements. Even accident-free workplaces are not hazard-free, and there has been an increasing focus on the behavioral sciences in safety.

## Behavior Approach

The tools offered by the behavioral sciences to stop risk-taking behaviors are limited and problematic. Theoretically, the way to permanently stop a behavior is through the use of punishment. This means attempting to change the consequences of the behavior. The natural consequences of risk-taking behaviors often are saving time and not getting injured. Effective punishment to extinguish a behavior must be timely and consistent. This means that risk taking must be regularly detected and dealt with in a timely manner.

If supervisors are not effectively policing workers or the safety culture is not policing itself, most risks will not be detected. Even if an organization improves its policing skills, it might not be able to deal with the number of discipline cases without delays and interruptions to operations. Anything that makes the punishment uncertain or delayed weakens its effectiveness.

Punishment has other negative side effects as well. It can damage relationships between leaders and followers. The role of leaders can be viewed as fixing the blame rather than fixing the problems.

Punishment also can change behaviors in unwanted ways. When a worker is punished, the desired result is to diminish the behavior for which the punishment was administered. Instead, the worker takes measures to not get caught rather than to comply; this is called avoidance behavior. When a worker finds alternate ways to comply but still show defiance and lack of cooperation, this is called malicious compliance. The use of force to change behaviors is fraught with opportunities to go wrong. Even when it carefully is administered, it produces a do-as-you-are-told culture that may accomplish compliance but seldom reaches excellence.

## The Positive Approach

The less-used, positive approach to safety involves defining what to do and using a different set of tools to make that happen. The goal of safety is to not have accidents, but what is the strategy and methodology to make that happen?

If we define safety as taking precautions rather than not taking risks, we begin to build this positive mental model. It is as simple as listing the risks you want to avoid and defining the steps to achieve it. Any rule, procedure or guideline for safety can be defined in terms of what to do rather than what not to do. The real advantage of doing so is not just an exercise in language; it is the beginning of creating a new strategy that will allow you to use more effective tools.

The alternative to policing is coaching. Cops catch people doing something wrong and impose a negative consequence. Coaches catch people doing something right and impose a positive consequence. Unlike policing, coaching builds strong and functional relationships. Cops are viewed as enemies, and coaches as allies. Creating a positive culture greatly is facilitated by removing the enmity and class structure of the givers and receivers of punishment.

The behavioral sciences have tools for starting or increasing behaviors that are stronger and less problematic than the tools to stop behaviors. Very few workers complain of receiving too much recognition or positive reinforcement for their safety performance. Only when you positively define safety can you change the tools you use to accomplish your goals. When you stop trying to avoid failure and start trying to achieve success, the whole mindset of your organization can change. You begin to build on strengths rather than addressing weaknesses. Communication focuses on wins rather than losses. Workers are motivated by visible progress towards goals and are more willing to expend discretionary effort to become even more excellent. Compliance gives way to going above and beyond.

Accidents are an enemy to business that can be attacked from two different directions. We can focus on the things to not do so we don't increase risks, or we can focus on the things we can do to reduce risks. If your goal is compliance, punishment can get you there. If your goal is excellence, you need to positively define what that looks like and coach your organization in that direction.

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