



To Delegate or Not to Delegate Safety?

Roles, responsibilities, and results expectations must be clear, situational, measurable, and focused on closing specific gaps.

- By [Shawn M. Galloway](#)
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To delegate or not to delegate safety? Yes, this is still a valuable question. Utopia, where all unquestionably own safety and hold themselves accountable for the results of their own behavior, would be ideal. We seek for safety to be a value, woven into the fabric of operational decisions and behaviors, but not everyone is there yet. Some are not even close. Envisioning the desired future is of value, but even more valuable is knowing precisely how to get there and who should play what role in the process.

Are We Beginning on the Same Page?

Even among many of the best-performing clients, initial consulting engagements identify the executive team has differing opinions about the goals in safety: what excellence would look like if achieved, what should occur to transform results, and whom to hold accountable for doing so. If the path to safety improvement starts with the senior leaders misaligned, imagine how this influences edicts and intents as they cascade throughout the organization.

In our 2013 book, "STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence," on the less complex issue of defining what is and isn't safety, we wrote:

"One issue we find too often hampering safety is a lack of clarity. We tend to assume that everyone knows what safety is and how to make it happen. What we find in our assessments is exactly the opposite. Everyone has a different idea about safety and most don't really know how to make it happen. Breaking safety down to something you can explain to a six-year-old is not condescending; it is the way to create deep understanding and profound alignment of efforts. When everyone is on the same page, thinking the same way and taking the same step for the same reasons, excellence begins to happen."

If what safety is and isn't has yet to be aligned, how can the journey to excellence be accomplished with the aligning and focusing of resources?

From Bad to Good to Excellent in Safety

If safety excellence is defined as "achieving zero injuries" or, worse, "zero regulatory citations," failing-less becomes the rallying cry and "doing enough to get by" becomes the driving motivation. Consider some legacy companies whose leaders experienced continual fatalities in years past: Getting to the point of zero recordable injuries is a lofty goal that, when accomplished, should be celebrated! When defining excellence in safety, it is

important to consider the starting point as well as the destination to be practical in implementation.

It is natural for safety professionals who might have different experiences (e.g., working for organizations longer on the journey to Safety Culture Excellence) to feel frustrated when safety appears to be a delegated, rather than shared, responsibility. Equally, it is natural for a well-intended leader to feel successful and justified in delegating safety's responsibility, because of the technical specificity required to meet the ever-changing and often confusing regulations. This is precisely why we have corporate attorneys, isn't it? Not everyone can become, nor should act as, a lawyer. Some leaders still, unfortunately, feel the same about safety professionals.

The Evolving Role of the Safety Professional is Not to Do

For organizations seeking excellence in safety performance and culture, the safety professional's role is not to own, to be in charge of, to run, or to lead safety. Like the general counsel or those with fiduciary responsibility, safety professionals are accountable for challenging and providing subject-matter expertise to the business leaders. At best, they should help execute, but not set, the Corporate Safety Excellence Strategy. This should be a business decision due to the criticality of its aligning and not conflicting with the overall business strategy.

Ultimately, the business leaders are responsible for the performance and culture in all aspects of operations; safety is no different. When the goal is to do the minimal necessary to get by in safety, it is logical for an organization to see the compelling value in delegating safety responsibility to a person or team. In high-functioning organizations, however, there are clear roles, responsibilities, and results (RRRs) for those in a formal safety role and those who also oversee the performance of others in business operations (e.g., first-line supervisors, foreman, managers, and executives).

More than just job duties, the RRR expectations must be clear, situational, measurable, and focused on closing the specific gaps between the current state and the desired future. Absent these clear and aligned safety RRRs, it is easy for confusion to set in about what we are trying to achieve and who is responsible for what. If the safety professional and business leader are finding themselves with different opinions of what safety success looks like, which is the best path to get there, and what are the delegated or shared responsibilities, then they aren't on the same page; and this is precisely the best place to start.

About the Author

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