

# What Determines Your Safety Focus?

BY SHAWN M. GALLOWAY

In your organization, who or what determines the focus of safety efforts? Is it driven by new government policies, corporate executives, site managers, the local safety professional, employees, or a recent injury? Ideally, the answer is: *none*, not by themselves. In my experience working with hundreds of safety cultures, regardless of the level of safety performance, I have found a common differing of opinion regarding what the next focus in safety should be. Employees feel the effort should be concentrated in one area, while the employer feels another.

Throughout my observations, I have identified several easy-to-recognize obstructions to success. These are outlined below to help you discover and neutralize the barriers to achieving a collaborative, risk-responding culture.

## Lack of the True Picture

Most employees do not receive enough information about safety. This often contributes to the development of inaccurate perceptions. For example, at a client site, a risk would be identified and submitted either as a safety suggestion or safety work order request. This information would flow to the safety professionals, who would aggressively research approaches to eliminate or minimize the risk. Occasionally, an immediate solution would not be identified. As a provisional step only, the site would request the employees wear a certain type of PPE.

From the employees' perspective, a safety concern was identified and then they were requested to wear PPE or told it is their responsibility to take new precautions. Unfortunately, this was a work in progress. The steps the safety professional was taking to *truly* eliminate the risk were not explained. When an individual does not have the true picture, gaps in understanding are created. It is human nature to fill this gap with individually determined information, which is not always accurate. Consider mapping how safety communication flows within your organization.

## Reacting vs. Responding

Medical professionals have a saying: "Early detection, early response." Pharmaceuticals teach us that *reacting*, by its very nature, is a negative action (such as reacting to a drug). *Responding*, however, is a positive action. Its purpose is to prevent negative outcomes that elicit reaction. In medicine, we do not define health as the absence of major disease but rather by the steps we take to prevent risk exposure, such as exercising, eating a balanced meal, regular checkups, etc.

Consider how this applies to safety. We cannot de-

fine safety as the absence of injuries. Similarly, it must be defined by the steps we take to ensure we are not at-risk. Discover where you are on the continuum of reacting vs. preventing. Consider asking your employees the following questions: "What percentage of our efforts is reactive, following an undesirable event?" "What percentage is proactive, or preventative, neutralizing risk before events?" Once this is identified, collectively discuss what proactive approaches could be taken that would avert the need to react.

## Low Opinion of Opinions

Specifically in safety, there is a commonly used phrase: Program of the Month. We continue to seek new ways to keep people injury free. Some work, some do not. Through education and experience, managers learn to trust data and hold a very low opinion of opinions. Without any malicious intent, suggestions become viewed as opinions and incident data as factual.

This is what has led to the global popularity of Behavior-Based Safety efforts. Like the Program of the Month, some methodologies have worked extremely well, some not at all. The ones that provided significant, sustainable gains shifted their trust in data: from data *after* an event to data *before* an event. This is not an easy transition because it is reliant on trust. Effective behavioral approaches efficiently target an understanding of common practice and influencers on risk. They prioritize items to address based on two criteria: easy to fix and widespread visible impact. *Opinions* about risk exposure start to become trusted data due to the often immediate, noticeable improvement in common practice (leading indicators) and resulting safety performance (lagging indicators).

## Synergistically Moving Forward

Safety professionals tend to look for the root cause of identified problems. Technically, we maintain certain competencies that necessitate our involvement in the solutions, but we can't do it alone if employee ownership is a desired goal. Achieving a collaborative and proactive culture requires a different approach.

There will always be multiple factors that both positively and negatively affect your culture. Synergistically identifying and responding to identified risk factors ensures not only ownership in the solution, but also proactive steps in the right direction. **OKS**

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