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# Who really owns safety?

**Bottom line reality differs from the rhetoric**

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If safety is more important than production, why does safety report up through legal, human resources or production rather than production reporting up through the company's number one priority?

If safety is so important, how many CEOs came from the safety department?

Safety is a core value and most organizations employ safety managers. But if trust and honesty are also common corporate values, where are the trust and honesty managers? The answer lies with the uncomfortable truth: reality.

## Let's analyze ownership

Not intending to sound flippant, and recognizing the importance of process, passion, and the technical and legal reasons for safety professionals, who "owns" safety is an important issue to be analyzed if excellence is the goal.

Delegating responsibilities to individuals to drive improvement is logical and arguably necessary for any corporate executive. However, for safety to truly become infused into company decisions and behaviors, it cannot be delegated nor managed by a corporate entity. When companies delegate responsibility to subject expert professionals to drive improvement, without a balance and measurement of contributed value, risks are encountered due to the obvious need to prove value and ensure employment stability.

## Self-serving subject experts

In *Are CEOs Getting the Best From Corporate Function?* Campbell, Kunisch and Müller-Stewens write, "Without sufficient guidance, corporate functions can become — often unintentionally — self-serving. Instead of developing policies and processes to give divisions the practical support they want and need, corporate functions measure themselves against industrywide best practices or implement initiatives that increase their influence or simplify their own work. The result is often a lack of cooperation from operating managers."

While a bit of harsh commentary on outsourced function, there is an often observed truth. Safety professionals tend to measure themselves against the practices of what is perceived as great by other safety leaders, programs,

methodologies or cultures, rather than what is great or perceived as excellent by the individual company they support. What is “best in industry” in safety will be different for each company, based on the practicality of how needs fit the reality of operations, budget constraint and corporate strategy. This should be determined by business, with advice from the safety professional; not the other way around.

## **Safety is one component of culture**

Safety improvement is business improvement. Moreover, like with any area of desired operational excellence, safety is only an aspect of your culture. It is not a stand-alone concept. While it is normal to tease out these aspects to better understand, manage and improve them, we must realize when we focus on one part (safety culture), we often miss the forest for the trees (the role safety plays in, and is affected by, corporate culture). A company’s entire culture — more than the aggregate of safety beliefs and behaviors — influences decisions and other operational priorities, perceptions and behaviors.

Consider a frequently-requested topic, such as providing safety leadership skills (e.g., performance feedback, coaching, counseling, accountability, communication, change-agent capabilities) to supervisory personnel. Is this safety leadership opportunity only benefiting safety or all aspects of business? How much more support would be obtained if skills like these were viewed to be universally beneficial, rather than how to help one piece of operational performance advance?

## **Culture as an add-on**

In a recent article on why culture change efforts fail more often than not, Fred Kofman writes about his lessons learned attempting to change a culture, sponsored by the wrong individuals, aligned with the wrong goals and focused on activities rather than measurable business results. Most critical was Kofman’s lesson in sponsorship by a group (the corporate university) tasked with culture improvement, rather than the business leaders. “This created the perception that the CEO ran the business, while the corporate university ran the culture.” He elaborates, “People felt pushed to attend activities that they saw as not part of their jobs. Culture became an additional thing to do, as opposed to the way to do everything.”

Safety culture change or any improvement in safety leadership (i.e., operational leader’s safety roles, responsibilities and expected results) that is led by the safety department potentially sends the message that safety owns the safety aspect of the culture and the business leaders own the business. Doesn’t this further silo, rather than integrate, safety responsibility?

## **Reality buried beneath rhetoric**

It’s a wonderful statement and a bit of a cliché to say that “Safety is everyone’s responsibility.” It has lost its meaning because most organizations have not effectively outlined the aforementioned safety leadership and hourly employee roles, and “everyone” is rarely held accountable for expected behavioral performance in a timely and consistent fashion to make a substantial difference. Ultimately, the senior executives are responsible for both culture and performance in all facets of the business. This too, is reality.

Consultants Katzenbach and Aguirre, in an article on the CEO’s responsibilities, write, “If you are the chief executive of a company that is sailing with the wind and leading in its competitive race, that’s a sign that your

culture is in sync with your strategy. This makes your company much more likely to deliver consistent and attractive profitability and growth results... However, if your company is heading into stormy waters, facing the kinds of disruptive competition or unexpected market changes that affect every industry sooner or later, then a program of normal reinforcing leadership won't cut it. A culture that no longer aligns with your strategic and performance priorities needs a lot more attention — from you and other senior leaders.”

## The ultimate responsibility

Safety improvement is ultimately the responsibility of executive leadership. The cost of safety (e.g., injuries, insurance rates, damaged public image, production down-time, morale, employee disengagement) erodes shareholder value, and the value of safety (reliability, increase in quality, employee satisfaction, attractive employer) creates customer value. This discussion should not be new to the senior leader, as it's reminiscent of the modern quality movement. Consider your organization; forget platitudes, vision statements, and the desired reality; who really leads safety? The business leaders or safety professionals? The answer will both define why you are achieving your current results and provide insight into the ability to achieve break-through performance.

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