

## Who Says "Go?" Is Safety Led or Abdicated?

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Are your business leaders good safety leaders, or do they delegate safety to someone else?

Over the past several decades, business has decentralized many specialty roles; leadership is not one of them. In most organizations, one person or small group sets the tone and establishes the priorities and values for the business. If these recognized leaders also lead safety, it becomes an organizational value. If they delegate safety to someone else, it sends an unmistakable message to the organization. Safety can still be viewed as important, but it is not in the organizational mainstream. The message is, "Let's run our business and, by the way, let's be safe too."

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

Many organizational leaders came up through the ranks and once were specialists themselves. They were financial, technical or sales people. These leaders tend to slant the organizational priorities toward their own specialty, while learning to manage other organizational realities. Very few specifically are groomed or educated to be organizational leaders and not many safety professionals climb into the organizational leadership roles. Good business leaders can become good safety leaders with two simple strategies: first, safety has to be expressed in business terms; and second, safety has to be managed like other business priorities.

### Expressing Safety in Business Terms

For safety to be mainstreamed into any organization, leaders must know the rationale for investing resources in it. If safety is viewed as a necessary evil that distracts from the more important priorities, it always will be a stepchild. Leaders who view good safety as good business know why this is so. The rationale for leading safety must be a business rationale as well as an aesthetic one. The rationale for working toward more excellent safety can be stated in the positive, in the negative or as a combination of both.

Positively stated benefits of excellent safety might include better public relations, qualification to do business with other organizations that value safety excellence, better recruiting of new employees, better insurance rates, fewer regulatory issues, etc. Although most organizations view safety as a cost center, some actually put an ROI on their safety efforts and justify the effort with measurable returns.

Negatively stated benefits of excellent safety simply can be the avoidance of costs and negative consequences of poor safety performance. Poor safety performance produces unwanted results and should be avoided. Avoiding failure can be motivating, especially if the failure is painful or expensive, but achieving success almost always is more motivating and more efficient. Almost any negative to be avoided can be stated as a positive to be sought after.

The majority of safety efforts involve human behavior. Even conditional controls start with behavioral

steps. The scientific tools used to shape human behavior are divided into starting and stopping tools. The tools to stop human behavior can have a negative impact on relationships and cultures, whereas the starting tools are more conducive to strong coaching relationships and team camaraderie. Defining the rationale for safety excellence as "what to do" vs. "what not to do" can be a powerful step toward success.

## Safety as Business Priority

This leads into the second way to help leaders become more effective at leading safety. This involves managing safety more like other business priorities. When business leaders contrast the way they manage safety to the way they manage other priorities or projects, they often find some stark differences:

- **The lack of vision of what success looks like, other than just fewer accidents.** Most other projects have a specific vision of success.
- **The lack of an overarching strategy.** Many organizations have safety goals, but few have any real strategy other than trying new programs and seeing if they impact the frequency or severity rates. The programs often are stand-alone projects with little or no direct link to an overall safety strategy. Almost no other project or priority is managed this way.
- **No marketing plan.** Most organizations don't think of a safety effort as something that must be sold to the workers, but the workers are the customers of any safety effort. If they don't buy in, it won't work as well as it could.
- **The lack of proactive accountability.** Workers are not held accountable for supporting the strategy, only for breaking the rules or getting hurt.
- **A failure to identify and enlist change agents.** Many safety programs assume that everyone simply will do as they are told and that doing so will produce better results. Few other change projects have that simplistic of an approach.
- **The lack of leading or process indicators.** Safety is managed and evaluated almost exclusively based on lagging indicators. These are not invalid metrics, but they are more valuable to evaluate rather than to improve safety performance.
- **The lack of a continuous-improvement strategy.** The widespread use of safety programs and lagging indicators tends to promote a mentality of planned beginnings and endings that mark wins or losses. Few programs have a second phase or a next milestone. Most non-safety projects are focused over a longer term and have a plan for ongoing improvement.

Organizations that view safety as a strategic advantage and utilize good business management tools to make it happen almost always are successful. It is critical to know the rationale for achieving safety excellence and sell it to the work force through vision, strategy and proactive accountability. The message is important, but it is the messenger who is critical. It must be the organizational leader(s) who creates this initiative and, once the whole organization is aligned, focused and paying attention, says "Go!"



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