

Who Should Develop Corporate Safety Strategy?

For excellence in any operational category to be recognized, it is imperative employees make decisions and behave in alignment with the intended strategic direction. Safety is not a stand-alone strategy within a business; it must be an integral part of the overall operational plan. How clear is your strategic direction, and how well can employees easily see the role safety plays within it?

Safety excellence is a strategic business decision and is fundamental to the overall direction, regardless of the purpose of the organization, profit or not-for-profit. Within high-performance organizations, the prioritization of energy, financial investment, the allocation of resources, and the alignment of processes in safety is integral to the business strategy. This requires, for the sake of alignment, that business decisions be made by its leaders with counsel from safety experts, internally or externally. This presents the critical need for safety strategists within corporations.

The Delegation of Safety

Today, it is perceived as politically incorrect for an executive to say anything other than “zero incidents is our goal and safety is our top priority and core value.” While of initial value, this thinking is limited. See “Zero Incident Goals Motivate Risk-Taking, Not Excellence” (*OH&S* magazine, Galloway, September 2012). Like other important business functions, the specifics on how to accomplish these initial safety goals tend to be delegated to the subject matter expert. However, if safety is indeed a core value, it cannot be delegated.

When an organization determines the need to place new emphasis on honesty, improving customer service, or improving trust within the company, this becomes a part of everyone’s responsibility and a centerpiece to the overall strategy, the framework within which decisions and efforts are prioritized to accomplish goals and objectives. Should these objectives be managed solely by a group, accomplished through a training program, or delegated to a department, they eventually fail to gain the traction needed for a sustainable impact. Safety must be an integral piece of corporate strategy, yet it requires its own three-to-five-year plan.

Developing the Three-to-Five-Year Plan

Creating a vision of the future, understanding the current state, outlining a plan to improve or align with the vision, and measuring progress along the way are all fundamental parts of strategy in all businesses. Consider these core areas:

- **Vision of the Future.** Organizations focused on creating excellence within their operational categories realize excellence is different than success. Success that isn’t repeatable, or to some degree predictable, isn’t excellent. In safety, you cannot define excellence exclusively by lagging indicators, which tend to confirm trends but do not predict them. You must be focused not just on the results, but also on what would be observable in the culture and performance that validates how the results were achieved.

- **Strategic Priorities and Possibilities.** What are the two to three areas that should be prioritized to make the vision a reality?

What is the most important aspect to focus on to produce the greatest amount of prevention to risk exposure? Which two or three focus areas would provide the most significant improvement in occupational culture? Most successful clients tend to rely on a comprehensive data-driven prioritization process that focuses on the dual areas of injury/incident prevention and cultural improvement. Determining this, buttressed by data-driven decisions, allows for greater confidence in the prioritized goals and objectives that support the strategic priorities.

- **Understanding the Current State.** Assessing the current culture and systems without a strategy or destination in mind is to perpetuate program-of-the-month experiences and effort-for-the-sake-of-effort thinking. The current-state assessment should provide an understanding of what will support or hinder the accomplishment of strategic priorities and prioritize based on value-add.

- **Measurements of Progress.** More organizations are taking the plunge to develop leading indicators, and most are still focusing on the measurement of activities (e.g., number of near-misses reported, housekeeping audits, behavioral observations) rather than indicators of how the activities are helping performance and progress toward the vision. This would validate the course of action and the results, as well as help in predicting future performance.

Key Strategic Questions

To develop your comprehensive strategic framework that creates confident decisions in the prioritization of efforts to improve safety culture and performance, consider the following five questions when outlining your improvement objectives.

1. What are we trying to accomplish and why?
2. How will success and excellence be defined?
3. How well are our systems, resources, capabilities, focus, and culture aligned with the strategic vision?
4. What data-driven process will help both proactively and reactively prioritize our injury/incident and cultural enhancement initiatives?
5. If we accomplish our objectives and meet our goals, what measurements indicate why and how it was achieved?

Who Establishes The Strategy?

Effective businesses already have effective strategic planning processes; let’s not duplicate our efforts. Aligning safety and business strategy need not be a complicated process; unless, of course, we continue thinking tactically about how we prioritize safety efforts. **OKS**

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