

Safety and Performance Excellence: Zero Accidents Does Not Equal Safety Excellence

How can we achieve safety excellence when we don't truly know what it is?

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[Terry L. Mathis](#)

A newly hired safety professional asked the CEO of his organization what was expected of him and the answer he got was "excellence." When he asked the CEO to elaborate, the CEO replied, "When you get to zero accidents come back and see me."

It seems that the term "excellence," as it applies to safety, commonly is misunderstood and poorly defined. So, what is excellence in safety performance? Is it simply a vacuum in which there are no accidents? Is it a short-term success? How will we recognize it when we see it? How can we achieve it if we don't understand what it truly is?

First, it is important to realize that "zero accidents" or any improvement in accident frequency or severity is a lagging indicator of safety. It is a result and not the process that produces it. It can be achieved through excellent performance but it also can be achieved by luck or a normal variation in accident occurrence. It may even be accomplished by suppressing reporting through intimidation or artificial stimuli such as bonus and incentive programs. Also, since most organizations qualify the term to include a certain classification of accident such as "zero recordables" or "zero lost-time accidents," it can be manipulated in reporting practices and post-accident management.

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There are three elements missing from many views of safety excellence that absolutely are critical to a true understanding and definition of the term: strategy, process indicators and culture.

Strategy – A definition of safety excellence that does not include the strategy to achieve it is a game without a game plan or a war without battle plans. Wanting to win is desirable, but victory without strategy is extremely rare.

Most organizations substitute goals or improvement targets for safety strategy. They define the desired results but not the process that will produce them. Underlying such thinking often is a naïve assumption that the current safety efforts are sufficient to produce excellence if utilized with more enthusiasm or motivation. The truth is, most safety efforts are producing a high percentage of what they ultimately are capable of achieving, and further improvement without better processes will be very limited.

Some organizations set improvement goals and buy off-the-shelf safety processes in hopes of achieving them. This can be an improvement over simply hoping to produce better results with no new processes. The thought is that the organization can continue current efforts and add another process to get even better results.

The most common problem with this approach goes back to the lack of an overall safety strategy. Exactly how will the new program or process supplement the existing efforts? Will it fill in a gap or create redundancy? Will it clarify or confuse the average employee trying to use it to improve safety? If the new program does not fit well into the overall safety strategy, it is uncertain how, or if, it will produce further improvements. Many organizations also put too much faith in the new program and feel they have purchased the magic solution to all their safety problems. Few new programs or processes are more than additional tools in the safety toolbox and disappoint those expecting magical results.

Process Indicators – Too much of safety is an attempt to manage with only lagging indicators. Many organizations attempt to develop leading indicators for safety in an effort to become more proactive. This direction toward more metrics generally is good, but limited. It is not simply more metrics, but better ones that we need.

Lagging indicators basically are "accountability" metrics. They tell us if we are doing better, worse or about the same. They do not tell us how to improve; this is the purpose of process indicators. If we have a strategy that involves process to produce results, we can measure how well we are working our processes, then determine if they are impacting the lagging indicators. In other words, we can measure if we are working our plan and measure whether or not our plan is working.

Excellence is not just about producing results; good process metrics can help us understand how good results are produced.

Culture – If approached correctly, a safety culture can be the sustainability tool of excellence. Culture not only influences its members' decisions and practices in the here and now, it impacts individual habits and the decisions and practices of future members as well. It truly can become "the way we do things around here" and "what we do when no one is watching." These common practices can be maintained through generations with little outside management necessary. However, without an overall safety strategy that is well understood by the culture and without process metrics to help the culture continuously measure and improve, most safety cultures fail to reach, much less sustain, excellent safety performance.

Many approaches to improving safety culture also focus on the characteristics of the culture rather than the capabilities. Excellent safety cultures are "can-do" cultures with the vision and tools to continuously improve. They have a strategy and metrics to keep them on track. They develop the characteristics of success as a by-product rather than a precursor of their performance

If your organization desires to achieve safety excellence, you must first develop a deep understanding of what excellence is. Deming called such an understanding "profound knowledge." It not only is a performance goal, but a definition of what excellence is and a process to achieve the goal. It also must have process metrics that facilitate understanding of how excellence is achieved. Excellence cannot be defined simply in terms of short-term results. The definition of excellence cannot inadvertently include results produced by luck and normal variation. Truly excellent safety organizations don't just get to zero; they know exactly how to duplicate and improve their success.



Terry L. Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, was named one of The 50 People Who Most Influenced EHS in 2010 and 2011 by EHS Today. As an international expert and safety culture practitioner, he has worked with hundreds of organizations, customizing innovative approaches to achieve and sustain safety culture excellence. He has spoken at numerous conferences, and is a regular presenter at NSC, ASSE PDC and ASSE SeminarFest. He can be reached at 800-395-1347 or info@proactsafety.com.

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