Forecasting Tomorrow: The Future of Safety Excellence

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For our family

Thank you for your love, support and encouragement.
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Introduction

Safety is rarely viewed as an exciting or interesting discussion topic for business leaders. Too often, safety is something delegated, outsourced, and, if we are honest, typically only thought of with great concern when bad things occur. With the exception of being viewed as a cost-center to manage, safety has not been regarded as a strategic value-contributor to organizations, and it’s no wonder.

Few business excellence books or university teachings mention direction of safety improvement efforts other than injury rates, legal responsibility, and how to mitigate operational, personal and process risk. “Fail less!” is the rallying cry, haphazard and meaningless goals of zero something-or-another abound.

Even with good intent, efforts to prevent injuries often disengage, distract and demotivate the very individuals whose discretionary effort is needed in order to significantly improve. Zero injuries is no longer the challenge for the best of the best. Rather, it is knowing precisely how it was achieved and how it can be sustained through creating want-to rather than have-to cultures, while maintaining the mindset that even great results can always be better.

Thankfully, times are changing.

Emerging trends are becoming increasing visible among multi-industries regarding how safety is viewed, thought of, strategically managed, and how progress is measured. Moreover, the cast of characters, the roles they play, and accountability for behavioral responsibilities are evolving, all for the better. While a plethora of companies have a long way
to go on the journey to safety excellence, certain companies are leading the pack.

As we partner with this range of companies we see these trends and use our observations in the articles we publish monthly. A number of these articles have been compiled and included to support these predictions of future trends in safety.

In the following pages, we will share with you our predictions of where safety efforts will be heading over the next several years. Such knowledge can help you to strategically plan for safety success in the future.
Foreword

Looking out over the city of Baku, Azerbaijan while running on a treadmill made in China, listening to a TED talk led by a gentlemen from Switzerland, playing on a device conceived by a company in California, contemplating the leadership keynote I was to give later that day, I finally landed on my personal mission.

Throughout my professional career, I have always had a passion for excellence in everything I do due to the work ethics instilled in me by my parents when I was a young, first-time employee. I’ve been honored to be recognized for my work, but I’ve continued to struggle with succinctly verbalizing my personal mission. It finally became clear.

Running at a moderate pace, I quickly grabbed the handrails of the treadmill and diverted my feet to the adjoining sides of the moving belt. I had it. My mission is to continuously challenge and evolve the global thinking around safety excellence. Knowing everyone is at a different level of maturity in the journey to safety excellence, I know I need to sometimes start with an even more basic definition: What is the real goal of safety?

Challenging the Goal of Safety

Having delivered the introductory keynote speech at the first ever International Safety Conference in the country of Azerbaijan, I’m feeling confident the global views of safety are evolving. Following established government Environmental, Health and Safety (EHS) regulations, the safety requirements of customers is now being viewed as the minimal necessary rather than the final destination. A healthy, new debate is emerging. What is the goal in safety?
Many organizations set their goal as a reduction rate, such as 20 percent improvement year over year. Others express their goal as ensuring employees leave their jobs at the end of their work day injury-free or “zero injuries”. More and more businesses are recognizing employees are often more exposed to risk outside of the workplace, and have evolved the goal to include employees also returning to work injury-free. But if we achieve a day, month or year injury-free, have we truly reached our goal? Did we accomplish this by being safer or just luckier this year?

Performing an online search for “the goal of safety” at the time of this writing, over 760,000 links resulted, with many differing views. Articles abound in which safety consultants write about their belief that zero incidents is the ultimate goal of safety. I strongly disagree. Incidents are failures in the established EHS management systems. It is doubtful that the systems were created to expect defects. When an incident occurs, someone has found a flaw in the system. Is the ultimate goal truly only to have no failures?

Aside from the demotivated culture you create (work hard to fail less), this goal can actually encourage risk-taking. If no injuries is equivalent to “safe” or “safety excellence”, it is logical for the workforce to develop a dangerous perception that, “Anything I do that does not result in an injury must be safe and what the company wants!”

This thinking is just as dangerous as assuming your state of health is perfect because you have no recognizable illness or disease. Is the ultimate goal of safety the absence of incidents or injuries? No!

Author Marty Rubin once wrote, “When the meaning is unclear, there is no meaning.” In establishing or improving
existing transformative goals, it is vital the leader begins their path not by looking for the next improvement opportunity, but instead with the clarity of knowing what the terms “safe”, “safety”, “at-risk” and “safety excellence” mean. Without clarity, efforts will be disjointed, misaligned, minimally supported and potentially demotivating.

To assist in creating this clarity, answer the following questions independently, and then with input from others.

1. What does “safe” mean?
2. How would you define “safety”?
3. What is acceptable and necessary risk?
4. What is unacceptable and unnecessary risk?
5. What would you see and hear if “zero incidents” was achieved?
6. What is “safety excellence”?

Safety must be defined and measured by what we collectively do to reduce risk exposure and by what you want, rather than solely by outcomes or undesirable results. Organizations that believe they have achieved excellence in safety performance and culture because they have not experienced failures are often the same ones surprised by a major catastrophe or a series of unfortunate events. We should not allow ourselves to narrowly define safety excellence by what we know as excellent practices, measurements, and cultures of today. For what is perceived as great in safety now will later be looked at in a similar appalling manner as how we view practices of just twenty years ago.

I have personally dedicated my life to a single, yet recognizably complex, mission: to continuously challenge and evolve the global thinking around safety excellence. I am fortunate the passion for my work has attracted many of the best in safety in every major industry. With every engagement, even my own
thinking expands and prompts me to question what I believed about safety excellence when I awoke in the morning. When we believe we know all there is to know about any subject, we not only do an injustice to ourselves, but also to those we impact with the goals we establish and the language we use to achieve them.

– Shawn M. Galloway
July 2015

Like Shawn, I have dedicated my life’s work to the continuous improvement of safety. I began safety improvement efforts first in my corporate career, then carried it outside to the rest of the world. It began with a few techniques I learned and shared, and has expanded significantly over the past two decades into true thought leadership and innovation. I don’t claim full credit for this exponential growth, as much of it was learned on client locations through extensive experimentation and in seeking better methodologies.

I am still a bit awed by the synergy created between consultant and client on such projects. If done in the right spirit, such collaboration multiplies greatly the creative thinking of both parties and gives them both a laboratory in which to test their ideas.

Even these predictions for the future have been greatly influenced by our clients. It is, after all, their futures we are predicting as well as our own. Seeing what is important to them helps draw the line from where we are to where we want to be, and it is somewhere on or near that line where we will find the future. The realizations of these past years has greatly shaped that future. Basic thinking in safety is giving way to more advanced concepts, and accepted practices are being questioned, and often replaced.
Likewise, my collaboration with Shawn Galloway has greatly expanded my range of thinking. It is rare to find another individual who is similar enough in thinking to truly work well together, yet different enough to add new value and perspective. Shawn is such an individual. He is willing to challenge ideas if he thinks they are flawed but also able to see kernels of good thought in many ideas that are worth utilizing and expanding. All his efforts have been forward thinking rather than resistant or pushing back. This kind of idea expansion has made us both more effective consultants, partners, and thought leaders.

Safety has been and will be even more influenced by forces outside its boundaries. In the past two decades, the outside influences have been largely academic. Psychology, sociology, and the behavioral sciences have attempted to turn their sciences into technologies useful in safety improvement. In the future, outside influences will be more strategic and business oriented. Safety will become more of a core business area rather than a delegated or outsourced specialty. The dichotomous idea of productivity versus safety will give way to a true concept of safe work.

Many of the accepted and heritage activities of safety will be tested for effectiveness, and many will fail. The “more is better” mentality will give way to improving the quality rather than the quantity of safety activities. Safety will be truly improved rather than simply added to.

All predictions are necessarily based on current thinking and trends. Any outstanding innovations or changes in the future can re-route the direction safety is taking. But we feel confident these main core directions are firmly entrenched into the current thinking of organizational leaders, and that thinking will steer safety efforts in these directions barring any huge
interference in this path. Leaders can benefit greatly from glimpsing the future through the eyes of other leaders. It is for this reason and the others mentioned above that I think this book can add great value to both current and future safety efforts.

-Terry L. Mathis
July 2015