



## SAFETY LEADERSHIP

### Safety and Performance Excellence: Weak Signals

*It not only is important to listen to weak signals in safety, but to send out strong ones.*

Terry L. Mathis | Sep 06, 2017

Ideas don't always translate exactly from one language to another. I was working with a foreign-owned organization and part of their safety vision, which had been translated from its original language, included a phrase that emphasized being sensitive to "weak signals." As I discussed this concept with the senior leaders, I was impressed with the insight this phrase represented. I found that they were referring

to a concept I also find valuable – being sensitive to subtle and less obvious aspects of safety.

As the discussion progressed, I commented that signals are both sent and received. The leaders were impressed with this expanded meaning of their phrase.

I have been speaking for more than two decades now on the concept of low-probability risks. I find that organizations rightfully address their highest-probability risks first. They apply the hierarchy of controls to these risks and eliminate, substitute, control administratively or simply put PPE on workers to protect them from the identified risks.

Often, when these efforts begin to mature, they hit a plateau in their impact on lagging indicators. Leaders often then forget Einstein's definition of insanity (doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results). They assume that what got them from bad to good in safety will get them from good to great. It almost never does.

Some organizations accept the limitations of their efforts and comfort themselves with current performance levels. For other organizations, this totally is unacceptable and they are dedicated to continuous improvement toward excellence. These organizations often are enabled to accomplish their next step change by expanding the safety focus to include the most common low-probability risks. Obvious or high-probability risks tend to get workers' attention more readily than less-obvious, low-probability ones.

When an organization expands their focus this way, it not uncommon for workers to question whether or not this will work. Their personal experience actually may contradict the apparent importance of low-probability risks since they may have taken such risks multiple times with no negative results. That is the nature of such risks, and addressing them requires a basic change of mindset. That mindset change accurately could be described as becoming sensitive to specific weak signals.

# Complacency

Another comparison I made to this idea involves a problem I often am asked to address: complacency. When a task becomes routine and repetitive, the associated risks become familiar. Familiarity tends to weaken the warning signal emitted by such risks. The risks do not go away but they become less threatening as workers address them successfully with no accidents. The perceived threat of these risks diminishes as the newness and unknown nature of them wears off. The sense of vulnerability correspondingly decreases as the worker accumulates experiences in which they get away with the risks.

Workers need to realize these signals are not gone but simply have become part of the background noise of the job. Re-sensitizing workers to these weak signals can emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing these commonplace risks. Keeping awareness of these risks high still can be a challenge, and many organizations address the most common of these risks by helping workers form habits to address them, thus eliminating the need for conscious decisions.

Realizing that workers do not always react to weak signals, organizations should strengthen the safety signals sent from the corporate office to the field. There are several communication mistakes that can weaken these signals. Some of the most common of these include:

Mixed messages from members of management – When each member of management who visits the workplace has a different focus or priority, the overall safety message is weakened. If these messages contradict each other, the impact is even greater. Conflicting messages tend to cancel each other out and damage the future credibility and lower trust levels.

Inconsistencies in the application of discipline for safety violations – The majority of workers I have interviewed view the fair and appropriate application of discipline as a key part of demonstrating management commitment to safety. When discipline is underused, workers perceive management as letting flagrant violators get away

without consequence while continuing to endanger themselves and their fellow workers. When discipline is overused or unfairly inconsistent, it sends the message that management views safety discipline as a tool for their own purposes rather than as a way to create a safe workplace. Fair and consistent discipline sends a strong signal that safety is expected. Anything short of that weakens the signal.

Too much or too little communication of safety data – Some organizations deluge workers with safety bulletins and other information. Too much safety data can cause confusion and make it difficult to remember and apply. Too little safety data leaves workers in the dark wondering how to continuously improve. Either can weaken the safety signal of expectations.

Overload of safety programs – I have written about the fallacy of thinking more is better, yet some organizations drive out a litany of new safety programs to the workplace with little awareness of the overload they are creating. Sometimes the weakest signal is the one lost in too many other signals.

For organizations looking for ways to increase excellence, this idea of weak signals potentially can help to identify new areas of improvement, especially in safety focus and communication. Failure to listen to the weak messages that come from hidden or less-obvious risks can seriously challenge the ability of the organization to achieve safety excellence. Likewise, sending out weak signals can fail to produce the desired results.

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