



# Safety first: Oh, the irony!

With almost everyone serious about safety, leaders at most levels can be heard reminding workers not to compromise safety for the benefit of production: “Safety first,” “Safety is our priority,” or “Don’t go so fast that you put yourself at risk.” Yet these same leaders routinely ask for quick action from their safety leaders to solve problems, prevent or respond to injuries and, more recently, develop a strategy: “Prevent injuries as fast as you can and quickly get me a 3-5 year plan. You have a week. Hurry up!”

## There is a difference in doing it right versus right now, and no plan is ever perfectly first conceived.

Roughly 20 years ago, the safety community realized that the absence of accidents, injuries or incidents does not mean the presence of safety. Just because a work group has performed for a period

of time without an unfortunate event does not indicate they are indeed safe. Sure, they might be quite good at safety, but measuring only lagging indicators tells you nothing about how the results were achieved.

A more recent evolution in thinking over the past decade has led executives to realize they lacked a true, comprehensive, multi-year safety strategy for achieving excellence in both performance and culture. Strategy is about value creation over a defined period of time, growing market share and capitalization for the business, and better serving customers. Therefore, the customers of safety efforts need a strategy to ensure the most effective and efficient paths are taken for injury prevention while also helping the culture recognize the value being delivered. Safety has to create both real and perceived value with the efforts, ultimately striving to transform a culture from have-to to want-to.

“STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence” (2013) and “Inside Strategy: Value Creation Within Your Organization”

(2015) outline pathways that have been used within hundreds of organizations to support the business plan. Other companies have leveraged their business strategy development methodologies and created a long-term, data-driven plan. Working now with all of these organizations, more strategic models have been reviewed that can be included. Of them all, the one constant variable that continues to stand out, leading to sustainable success, is deliberate, well thought-out action with an executive team that realizes good strategy takes time to get it right.

It seems ironic that workers are told to take their time, but the safety department is held accountable to take quick action for long-term plans. We were recently contacted for help with a problem that appears in our email far too often: After working for three years on a plan quickly crafted, a company found the plan yielded no impact on safety performance. Three years were lost until the leadership team came to the conclusion that working on the wrong things efficiently is still working on the wrong things. With external

support and the right data used within a proven methodology, this company will now take all of the current year to develop its 2020-2025 plan.

There is a difference in doing it right versus right now, and no plan is ever perfectly first conceived. If it was easy, most occupational injuries would already have been eradicated. Data must be leveraged and contingency plans considered. This takes time. If we want safe work, we must be deliberate in our actions. If we want safety excellence, we must also be deliberate in our plans to get there.

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