

THE LABORATORY FOR TESTING SAFETY EFFORTS

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to safety.

Several of my academic friends and associates have criticized me for being critical of them and their approach to safety. Ironic to use criticism to condemn criticism. But to me, I was not being critical but rather analytical. While I disagreed with many of their conclusions and approaches, I carefully read everything they wrote. I find academic investigation to be interesting and potentially valuable. However, such activity is science, and safety is technology. Science discovers the principle, and technology applies it to the real world.

During my corporate career, I headed a number of project teams assigned to solve a problem or explore options to take advantage of an opportunity. In every team, we had academic subject matter experts. In no team were they ever in charge. I think the structure of these teams speaks volumes about the best role for both academics and technologists.

Science unapplied is virtually useless. Technology based on false assumptions is not only useless, but dangerous. The two need to work together harmoniously to be truly effective.

People from both disciplines have tried to learn the other and be a holistic practitioner of good safety practices in the workplace. Few, if any, have achieved sustained success doing so. Not that there have not been successes in reducing accidents using the knowledge of such practitioners. Several such self-proclaimed safety experts have success stories attached to their efforts, and almost all also have failures.

I believe these failures are not strictly due to poor practices or faulty logic. Every academic who proclaims that their methodology is superior to all others has a failure rate. The most successful

academics who started large consulting practices blame their failures on the consultants in the field. The assumption is that the methodology is perfect, but the field personnel are not. That assumption is partially true. Consultants can make mistakes and fail to carry out the plan. But consultants can also take the exact same approach and be successful at one site and unsuccessful at another.

So what truly differentiates success from failure? I suggest it is not the scientific foundation of the approach. It is not the technology developed from the science. And it is not the inconsistencies in the consultants' practice in delivering services. The difference is the safety culture of the site where the improvement efforts are taking place.

What works with one safety culture does not necessarily work with another. Every group of workers has had a different experience and has come to different conclusions about the safest way to work at their site. Every group of workers has a different relationship model among its members, which dictates what is acceptable to discuss and what is not.

Every culture is impacted by a different set of supervisors and managers who may have vastly different leadership styles and practices. Every culture is impacted by different environmental workplace conditions, including equipment interfaces and procedures. Every culture has a unique set of pressures for production numbers, quality and timing. All these factors make it virtually impossible to develop one methodology that works for all.

Many academics find it difficult to accept there is no one-size-fits-all approach to safety. Science seeks out universal truths, and such



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truths should address safety universally. But the devil is in the details. While the science may be universally true, the application of it can be as varied as the culture in which you are attempting to apply the science.

At a conference years ago, an academic pointed out a principle of psychology called stated intent. The premise was that if a person stated their intent to do something to others, they were more likely to follow through with it. As for how stated intent could be used in safety, he proposed asking workers to fill out a card stating their intent to wear a particular piece of PPE. When he asked the other panelists what they thought about that approach, one of them suggested he would get the card back somewhere they did not want it.

The science was accurate, but the technology was not a good fit with the safety culture. If you want to build a structure, the physics are the same on Earth as they are on Mars. However, the environment is different, and the application of the physics must be suited to the environment. The universal truths must be tempered with the situational realities.

Once, a client company asked me to develop training for salespeople to sell a highly technical product. They wanted to know if they should teach technicians how to sell or teach salespeople the science behind the product. I told them I had successfully taught science to non-scientists but had never successfully taught sales to non-salespeople. We brought in their sales force and taught them to sell the new product with great success.

I think this exemplifies the challenge of marrying science and technology in safety. I have found it much easier to take people

familiar with the culture and its members and teach them safety science rather than teach scientists all the soft skills needed to implement safety processes in a specific safety culture. I have successfully taught a few consultants to both assess a safety culture and to customize an approach to safety that fits the culture. Most consultants only mastered a few, but not all, of the skills needed to deliver customized safety improvement.

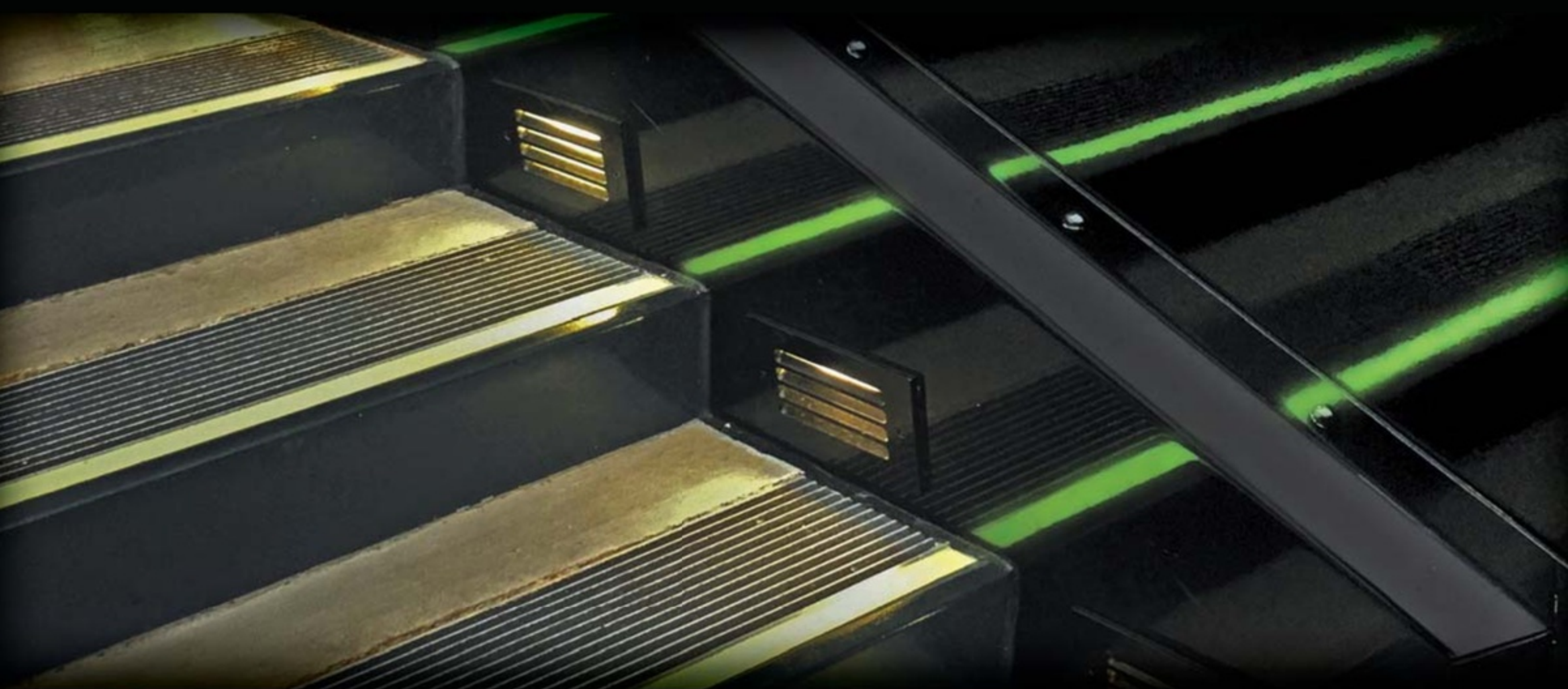
I have spent the last 28 years assessing safety cultures and customizing approaches to help organizations reach safety excellence. The five books, 250 blogs and podcasts, and over 200 articles I have published were based on my experiences with my client companies. I think the real world of safety is the perfect laboratory in which to study and perfect safety technology. The acid test for any approach is if it works in the real world—where it really counts.

Because I am no longer working directly with clients or consultants, I am running out of real world material and will not be writing a regular column for much longer. Thank you all for following. Most of all, thank you for passionately caring for the safety of yourself and others. **EHS**

Terry Mathis, founder and former CEO of ProAct Safety, served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over for the past 28 years. He recently retired and was succeeded by Shawn Galloway, the former president of ProAct Safety. Terry and Shawn have worked closely over the past years on numerous projects around the world and have co-authored five books together. Shawn can be reached at info@proactsafety.com or (800) 395-1347.

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