

Caring More Deeply About Safety

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Leaders want to know: Is there a key to getting workers to care more deeply about safety? Or are we asking the wrong question?

Leaders of organizations constantly are reminded that safety must start at the top. They also have learned that it can't stop there – it must permeate all levels of the organization.

More and more leaders want to know how to do that – how to turn a workforce on to its safety potential. As one executive put it: "What is the key to getting workers to care more deeply about safety?"

This question illustrates the root of the problem: We're asking the wrong question! Why have we assumed that workers don't care enough about safety, and that making them care more is the solution? Of course workers care about safety. They are the ones who get injured when it doesn't work. Their families are the ones who have to learn to live on reduced pay and juggle medical bills while nursing a breadwinner back to health.

The right question is, "How do we truly help our workers be safer?" The right answer is, "By focusing them on their best opportunities for improvement, challenging them to excel and measuring their progress toward excellence."

When leaders simply admonish workers to care more about safety, how do workers respond? The ones who haven't been injured tend to carry on as usual and the ones who have been injured try not to repeat their accidents. In short, performance is not significantly changed. Similar performance will most often produce similar results.

Workers must perform better in order to produce better results. The assumption that simply caring more will accomplish that goal has proven to be erroneous. It is like a general saying, "He lost the war because his soldiers didn't care deeply enough about victory."

Do Better, Not More

What is the proper focus for workers to achieve safety excellence? When safety results are unacceptable, many organizations respond by adding programs or activities. The assumption that an organization is not doing enough may totally ignore the fact that what they are doing is not effective.

Many organizations need to do better, not more. Admonishing people to do better will not work. Leaders must define exactly how to be better. This decision must come from a strategy for safety, not just throwing effort at the problem. Safety strategy is a battle plan that will help each worker know the goal, how to accomplish it and what their individual role is in creating a victory.

Just as military victories are won one battle at a time, safety excellence must be developed in sequential steps. Trying to do too much at once is the cause of many safety failures. Telling workers to care more, do

more or do better is not only too vague, it also is too much. Targeting specific safety issues and addressing them in order, one at a time, is the way to focus worker attention. This approach not only creates success, but makes the workers feel more directly involved in the success. When workers engage in addressing safety issues and realize they can gain control of outcomes, the core competency of safety begins to grow in the culture.

Challenged to Excel

In order to keep this core competency growing, the workforce must be challenged to excel. Ordinary causes don't illicit extraordinary effort. Safety must become a high value in the culture that is prized and continuously improved.

To create such engagement in the cause of safety, leaders must put a human face on safety. The goal of safety must involve people, not just numbers. Workers need to believe that safety efforts will benefit them, their families and their fellow workers, not just the company and executive bonuses. Accident reports need to describe how people were affected and focus on how to avoid repeating them. In short, safety needs to appeal to the hearts of the workers.

In addition to having their hearts engaged in the safety efforts, workers need to belong to the safety culture. Safety efforts need to have a team spirit and involve everyone collaboratively in preventing accidents. It is critical for leaders to create this sense of teamwork through cooperative efforts and team-building techniques. It also is important that leaders avoid activities that diminish teamwork, like creating internal competition among workers that creates winners and losers within the team. Safety success should be a team win celebrated by everyone.

In addition to believing in and belonging to a safety team, it is important that workers participate in safety activities. Simply following the rules and procedures and wearing required PPE is not enough to challenge excellence. Going above and beyond with stretch goals for safety can incentivize workers to put extra effort and attention into the safety initiatives. The tone of communication from leaders needs to change from command to challenge, from telling workers what to do to asking workers how we can accomplish this level of excellence.

The final influence on caring is keeping score. Imagine going to a sporting event where multiple activities are taking place, but no one is keeping score until it is all over. Safety efforts can be very similar: Everyone performs their jobs every day, but we don't find out until the end of the month how well or poorly we performed. Many workers fail to see how their individual contribution impacts organizational safety performance. This largely is due to the fact that the metrics used to measure safety performance do not focus on this connection.

Like so many things in safety, caring is a byproduct of other issues. It only can be created or improved by addressing the issues that influence it. Engaged workers appear to care more than unengaged workers. Getting workers truly engaged in safety excellence can be accomplished one step at a time. Caring more for safety comes from being successfully engaged, not from leaders admonishing workers to care more.

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