Profound Knowledge:
What Drives Your Safety Strategy

All effective leaders desire an engaged culture and place that as an indicator of progress toward cultural enhancement in all areas of the business, not just safety.

What data allows you to proactively make progress and set strategic priorities for improvement in both safety performance and culture? Although everyone has them, opinions should be used very cautiously to drive strategy. Successful leaders learn through education and experience to trust data and maintain a low opinion of opinions. The difference in the amount and quality of risk-identification and cultural data versus injury data available to make such decisions indicates whether your safety strategy is effectively focused on prevention or reaction.

Organizations lacking a proactive prioritization process are easily distracted with each incident and injury. Easily distracted companies struggle, at best, to make significant progress in safety improvement. Are your strategic priorities for safety focusing on reacting to the previous year's performance or on moving toward the shared vision of safety excellence, and are they defined both behaviorally and in results terms? Organizations that truly "get it" manage, set goals, and measure their progress toward what they want, rather than the distance from what they don't.

All organizations desire to achieve zero injuries, thus it is logical to measure the amount of injuries that have occurred to determine performance levels. After all, what gets measured gets managed, right? Wrong. At least, not always. The vast majority of organizations exclusively using lagging indicator data in any area of operating performance will always reach a plateau in improvement due to the loss of statistical significance in the data.

As companies get better in safety, the data no longer provide visible trends to respond to, leaving the organization with random data points, not easily managed. Zero-incident metrics, when achieved, are not continuous improvement measurements. This leads well-intending organizations to set their goal as "Beyond Zero," which is far too vague to nudge desirable behavior and align leaders and their team toward continuous improvement.

Leaders are ultimately responsible for both performance and culture in organizations. How well aligned are your leaders at all levels to help you accomplish your improvement targets and execute against your strategic priorities? If the organizational safety goals are focusing on failing less, a potentially dangerous message is sent that as long as the leaders do not have teams that fail (e.g., have an accident/incident, are injured), they are doing their part.

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Alternatively, even if the responsibilities for leaders are well communicated and understood, a false correlation can be established when rates improve (i.e., I was doing what is expected of me and we had improvement, thus I must be doing the right things). Sometimes improvement occurs due to normal variation, luck, or because you were simply placing more attention on it. Sustainability is always the true test of effectiveness. Improvement goals should evolve from failing less (i.e., zero injuries) to achieving success (e.g., what activities are occurring consistently, what is observable that validates the performance and progress toward that which achieved zero injuries). When priorities are established that close the gap from the data and confirm the current state as well as the desired vision of excellence, new insights are provided.

All effective leaders desire an engaged culture and place that as an indicator of progress toward cultural enhancement in all areas of the business, not just safety. Moreover, these leaders want hands and feet, as well as hearts and minds, engaged; the latter being a better driver of the former than edicts. If hearts and minds are to be engaged, this requires a healthy degree of open, collaborative questioning of the goals around improvement, the vision of what excellence really means and what it would look like, threshold for new improvement initiatives, the most practical approaches to close gaps, and how progress, not just activities and results, will be measured.

The early challenge in safety improvement is, indeed, getting to zero. Let us not discount its importance; rather, let's understand its limitation. The challenge in the future will be to know precisely how and why you got there and understand where the continuous improvement opportunities lie. W. Edwards Deming, one of the founders of the quality movement, called this "profound knowledge." Leaders with such awareness not only maintain confidence in the direction for future improvement, but also are able to prevent undesirable events, predict expected results, engage the organization to continually seek a better way, and create a culture that sustains progress without constant prodding. In closing, let us reframe the opening question: What profound knowledge allows you to proactively determine how to continuously improve performance and culture? If all you have are opinions, how will you measure progress? **OHS**

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