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Safety Culture: The Second Level of Leading Indicators

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Culture can be defined as common practice. Having everyone in a group define or describe basic concepts the same way can begin to drive commonality of thought and action, i.e. improve your safety culture.

Last month's article discussed developing metrics for safety drivers – the activities designed to drive safety performance to a higher level. These metrics can comprise the first level of a balanced scorecard for safety. They can be measured separately and viewed as part of a safety dashboard, or weighted and combined into a single score, or both.

Measuring these activities indicates if your organization is truly working your safety plan. The metrics that follow can tell if your plan is working and having the desired results.

Second-level metrics are the result of the first-level activities, which begin to improve the safety culture. For our purposes, we are going to define "culture" as what the group of employees shares and agrees on, i.e. concepts, perceptions and competencies. The most prevalent definitions simply define culture as common practice.

The basic premise here is that culture is not "the way we do things around here," but the influences that cause us to do things in that certain way. This methodology recognizes that an effective safety program drives workers' thinking and skills, which drives their performance, which in turn drives results. A true balanced scorecard for safety measures each of these four areas and begins to understand the relationships between them.

Start with Basic Safety Concepts

The word "common" is the key not only to understanding what a culture is, but also in how to influence one. In safety, one thing that can become common rather quickly is a set of basic safety definitions. Having everyone in a group define or describe basic concepts the same way can begin to drive commonality of thought and action.

For example, in your organization, what is the common definition of safety? If workers think of safety as simply "not getting hurt," that definition drives wrong thinking. If a practice does not "get you hurt," it must be "safe."

If, on the other hand, workers develop a common definition of safety as: 1) Knowing the risks; 2) Knowing the precautions to minimize or control the risks; and 3) Regularly taking those precautions, they develop safety thinking that truly can help them improve their own safety performance and the performance of their fellow workers. The commonality of definitions can be driven in training, safety meetings and other forms of communication and informally can be measured in focus groups or more formally in testing or surveys. Common definitions are a simple way to align thinking and get everyone on the same page.

Getting workers to adopt common definitions should drive commonality in perceptions as well. The way

workers perceive safety challenges and the way they prioritize their perceived risks should begin to grow more parallel. Differences in perceptions should begin to narrow as workers see things more and more the same way. Again, common is the key to culture.

Employee Perceptions

Perceptions also are a great source for continuously improving your safety drivers. Knowing and measuring the way workers perceive the value of safety training and meetings can help you improve them. Perceptions of safety communication can help adjust the amount and quality as well as the media used to communicate. Perceptions of safety leadership and supervision can help leaders and supervisors see themselves through the workers' eyes and gain perspective on how to improve their style and techniques. Perceptions can be measured and managed, and their impact on safety results can be correlated.

Although there are many off-the-shelf perceptions surveys that claim to measure safety culture, I strongly suggest organizations consider developing their own. There is no harm in utilizing expert help to do so, but the survey should be customized for the organization, which is not possible with most ready-made ones.

The advantages of a customized perception survey includes the use of organization-specific terminology and the ability to measure perceptions about organization-specific programs or processes. For example, if you call first-line supervisors "foremen" or "team leads" or some other specific term, a customized survey will use your term and not some generic label that might be misunderstood or misconstrued.

Also, if you have a specific program in your safety strategy that other organizations might not have or that might not show up as part of an off-the-shelf perception survey, you can measure how workers perceive its effectiveness.

Another great advantage of a customized perception survey is that you are not charged to administer it each time you use it, allowing you to use it when needed rather than when budgeted. Some ready-made surveys can be costly to administer and lead organizations to limit the use of them to only every few years, This is not sufficient to determine trends in perceptual change. These and other advantages have led most forward-thinking organizations to develop their own instrument for measuring perceptions.

Competency Level of Employees

Another area of cultural measurement is the skill level or competency of the employees. On the worker level, this could be job-specific skills. For supervisors, it could be coaching skills. For leaders, it could be communication, organization and motivational skills.

The level of competency is a key driver of safety culture. Each employee should be expected to become an expert at his or her job as well as a safety expert at the specific safety issues of that job.

As safety drivers (such as training) dispense information, does that information get remembered and utilized to increase skill and expertise? Do safety meetings focus workers on the safety issues about to be faced? Does safety communication help to prioritize safety efforts and continuously improve? In short, do safety drivers increase worker competency?

Organizations that measure the quantity and quality of their safety drivers and then measure how these drivers have affected these three elements of safety culture (concepts, perceptions and competencies) begin to understand the process of safety improvement. You have to work your plan (drive safety improvement) and your plan has to work (align and improve your safety culture). If these elements of safety are effective and efficient, they drive improved safety performance, which is the topic for next

month.

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