



## The Confrontation Calamity

[Terry L. Mathis](#)

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Many in the safety community have adopted a concept that not only is incorrect but also could do more harm than good, ultimately. This concept has been labeled “confrontation.”

Some proponents of this concept have gone so far as to claim that it possibly is the most crucial skill of safety. Workers must be willing to confront each other when they see risks being taken. Supervisors must confront risk-takers, and the whole organization must be willing to confront its own willingness to take risks.

Much of this thinking is a reaction to safety cultures in which workers hesitate or refuse to talk to each other about safety issues. Certainly worker interaction potentially can improve safety, but the wrong kind of interaction can be worse than no interaction at all.

Supervisors also must be active communicators of safety in the workplace. If they fail to direct and correct safety practices during the course of work, serious consequences can follow. But again, what should be the nature of safety’s supervisory style? Should it be confrontational or cooperative? Should it be correcting or coaching?

### The Trouble with Confrontation

The problems with the confrontation concept are four-fold: 1.) It attempts to improve one aspect of safety while inadvertently damaging another. 2.) It makes an incomplete assumption about risk-taking. 3.) It utilizes a change methodology that has been proven to be less effective than others. 4.) It has no process indicators to measure or manage its implementation or results.

Safety-excellence efforts typically are two-fold: They attempt to improve accident-reduction efforts and to create a desirable safety culture in which there is collaboration and cooperation. While confrontation can make some claim to address accident reduction, it creates a safety culture of enmity.

Confrontation is, by its very nature, adversarial. Proponents of confrontation attempt to qualify it and soften it by explaining that the person attacking has good intentions. Just as some experts once tried to combine the opposing ideas of construction and criticism into constructive criticism, they now have a new set of contradictions to reconcile.

Well-meaning criticism still is critical, just as well-meaning confrontation still is confrontational. A culture in which people, because of their good intentions, are willing to attack each other is not a culture of excellence. Coaching and collaboration are the tools of excellence, and confrontation is the antithesis of these tools.

The concept that confrontation can improve accident reduction assumes that all or most safety decisions are within the control of the worker and not influenced by organizational or conditional issues. If a

worker's decision to take a risk is affected by outside influences such as the availability of tools and equipment or workstation design, confrontation does not discover or document these. There also is no methodology in confrontation to remove or alter such influences on safety decisions. Allowing these influences to persist unaddressed is a formula to make sure they continue to shape future behavior.

Confronting workers over issues they cannot control is a formula for disagreement, not improvement. Naively assuming that confrontation can overcome obstacles and barriers to safety is an approach doomed to failure and disappointment.

Additionally, the idea that a person making a bad decision can be coerced into making a better decision through confrontation is, at best, questionable. Confrontation usually causes a defensive response rather than creating an openness to constructive improvement. Even though some advocates of confrontation attempt to expand the concept to include positive reinforcement, this is a serious misnomer at best. Confrontation and positive reinforcement are polar opposites.

## Positive Reinforcement

Positive reinforcement of safe behavior has been proven to be a more effective method of accomplishing behavioral change. Targeting specific behaviors to improve safety and positively reinforcing them has proven more effective than simply looking for random safe behaviors to reinforce.

Confronting unsafe behavior automatically does not create safe behavior. Confrontation does not target specific improvements and reinforce workers for progress. It only singles out the negatives and centers all interpersonal encounters around them.

If confrontation creates any behavioral change at all, it often is a forced change. Forced changes usually are temporary and go away after the person exerting the force goes away. The end result is that even the most well-intentioned confrontation fails to change behaviors effectively, efficiently or permanently.

Another serious problem with the confrontational approach to improving safety is a complete lack of process metrics. No one has prescribed an effective way to measure the quantity, quality or the impact of confrontation on safety improvement. Confronting simply becomes another program that is implemented and evaluated at the end of the year by the variation in lagging indicators.

Safety processes without process indicators are being abandoned in favor of ones that can be measured and managed. Although measurement is not management, it is a critical element of management. Without process metrics, organizations cannot know if confrontation is happening or not. They cannot know how often it is happening or if the quality of it is increasing or decreasing.

Without process metrics, it virtually is impossible to determine if changes in lagging indicators are being caused by the process or by other factors. The value and effectiveness of such processes only can be guessed.

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Confrontation is little more than another attempt to avoid failure rather than achieve success in safety. It is a program to address the reluctance to discuss safety in the workplace that replaces silence with enmity. Programmatic approaches to safety quickly are being replaced with strategic approaches.

Organizations are creating comprehensive safety strategies and executing against them. Such strategies almost always address both accident-reduction behaviors and safety-culture-building behaviors. Even if confrontation is believed to prevent accidents, it would seldom pass the test of contributing to the creation of a desirable safety culture.

Programs and processes to improve safety should fit in and contribute strategic value or be abandoned. Regardless of whatever good intentions one may have, confrontation is not an effective way to strategically achieve safety-culture and performance excellence.



***Terry L. Mathis is the co-author of “STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence” and founder and CEO of ProAct Safety. In 2013, EHS TODAY named him one of “The 50 People Who Most Influenced EHS” for the third consecutive time. He can be reached at 800-395-1347 or [info@proactsafety.com](mailto:info@proactsafety.com).***

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