

# The War on Accidents

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In a war, the military is charged with accomplishing a mission. Casualties and wounded not only create tragedy and heartbreak, they also make it even more costly and difficult to succeed in the mission. Steps are taken to minimize casualties; soldiers are trained and briefed, non-commissioned officers are assigned to direct their actions, officers develop strategies to complete the mission with minimal casualties and intelligence is sought to keep informed about the enemy's movements and other changing conditions. The whole war is a dynamic and flexible team effort to win.

Likewise, businesses and other organizations have missions. The success of these missions adversely can be impacted by workplace injuries. If organizations truly want to win, they need to have efforts parallel to those of the military - to accomplish their missions while minimizing employee injuries. The key to developing such efforts begins with a shift in the basic mindset among organizational leadership. Safety must become a part of the mission, not a separate issue that can be delegated to specialists.

Traditional thinking in safety has been more like a holding pattern than a plan for victory. Many organizations are adopting new programs or making small adjustments to what they have always done, hoping to fail a little less this year than last. Organizational leaders develop strategies for production and marketing. Safety often is an afterthought or simply a nagging distraction from what they view as their true mission.

If safety has a strategy, it is developed by safety specialists and often conflicts with leadership's strategies. When the safety strategy conflicts with the leadership strategy, safety always loses. Even leaders who care about safety often don't really understand what it takes to be successful.

## The Road to Excellence

Our most successful clients began their road to safety excellence with a strategy. That strategy has several important characteristics:

- It was developed by organizational leaders (not just by safety professionals).
- It put safety in its proper context with production and other priorities and did not create conflict among them.
- It prompted people to think correctly about safety not just follow a plan.



- It recognized the value that needed to be created for safety success at each level in the organizational chart.
- It sought out information about changing conditions and measurements of progress and remained flexible to change.
- It included a plan for accountability.

Just as a successful military trains its soldiers, a successful organization must train its workforce. The goals of training must be aligned with the strategy of adding value, not simply be in compliance or put warm bodies in classrooms or in front of computers. In order for training to add value to workers, it must meet their needs.

This means organizations must determine needs not only through mission objectives or compliance requirements, but from the perceptions of the workers themselves. If workers do not perceive the training as valuable, the training is not successful. Unsuccessful training will inevitably lead to unsuccessful performance and results. Adjust training based on employee input and don't wait for poor

results to prompt action.

First-line supervisors are the organizational equivalent of a non-commissioned officer. In many organizations, first-line supervisors exert a tremendous amount of influence over employee performance. Yet, they remain the most undertrained level of most organizations.

Successful supervision requires a rather unique set of skills and knowledge: job-specific knowledge, a keen understanding of organizational goals and strategy, communication and coaching skills. Most supervisors are promoted up through the workforce ranks and often have the knowledge and ability to do the jobs of those they supervise. Other skills are less universal. Many workers promoted to supervisory positions simply follow the patterns of their predecessors, making a few changes to what they did not like about the old boss.

Very few organizations have mandatory or timely training for supervisors, and those that do often omit important skills and knowledge in the training. When safety is a delegated responsibility, supervisors often view it as a competing priority to their real job of production. The lack of a unified mission strategy can make safety almost impossible for workers who are torn between conflicting goals and directions from two authority figures: the boss and the safety professional.

The greatest value a supervisor can add to the organization is dependent on the skill of coaching. Coaching is the process of helping another individual improve their skills and performance. Many supervisors focus their efforts on their own skills and performance, and measure their success by the amount of control they have over their workers. When supervisors realize their true job is getting more out of their workers, the value-add begins. Supervisors realize success is not just in being a great leader but in leading great people. If safety is not among the supervisor's perceived priorities, the progress is one-dimensional and safety can suffer.

Excellence in the real world demands flexibility. Successful organizations develop insightful key process indicators (KPIs) to help them adjust proactively. They don't worship lagging indicators nor deceive themselves into thinking they are successful when accidents take a temporary break. They measure value added to workers and supervisors. They

measure how that value translates into improved performance and how that performance translates into improved lagging indicators. They not only achieve excellent results, they know exactly how they achieved them and how to repeat them in the future.

You can't stop the war to avoid casualties. If you do, everyone becomes a casualty. But you can develop a mission-specific strategy that includes safety and recognizes the need to add value to safety

efforts at every level. You can measure the value added and develop a profound knowledge of where safety excellence and organizational excellence come from and how critical they are to each other. **EHS**

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