

Culture

Don't steamroll safety

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Coping with the tide of everyday operations



We all agree that leaders excel when they unite their teams around a common cause and

promote lateral, open communication -- complete with employee empowerment and ownership of the cause. We can agree that no safety culture is built entirely on behavior-based safety or regulatory compliance alone. Ultimately, we can all agree that safe behaviors must exist within safe conditions in the workplace.

Safety professionals work diligently to engage both leaders and employees. But there is often a challenge: leaders wish their employees would just "be careful" without doing diligence to hazard identification, assessment and control. The result: workers claim leaders are only concerned with productivity and budgets.

The popular saying is "everyone owns safety." The reality: should an incident occur, someone is going to answer for it. The fact: everyone owns their own piece of the safety culture and each has their own responsibilities.

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Management styles

During planning, preparedness, training exercises and other facets of a high-reliability organization, a transformational environment allows for lateral communication, a trusting and just culture, and the empowerment and ownership necessary to continually improve processes. This is done through persistent hazard identification, assessment, and control.

Open communication decreases turnover (Smith & Macko, 2014) and servant leadership and its dedication to improving followers' professional development and opportunities increases operational capabilities (Liden, Wayne, Liao et. al, 2014). An emergency might require a more hierarchical, direct management approach than a transformational, developmental environment. Still, leaders must know what their responsibilities are and where their authority and accountability begins and ends.

In many organizations and systems, leadership exists in a vertical structure. Macro-leaders (the CEO, COO, CFO and others) push directives down to field leaders and department directors. Directors push directives down to managers who push them to supervisors – on down to the frontline staff.

Safety leadership

Now let's talk about safety specifically. In some organizations, safety management exists at the corporate level, usually one or a few centralized professionals doing their best to develop a culture. They develop a network to decentralize safety processes throughout a

large volume of employees in a horizontal structure. Other functional areas have horizontal leadership at the system level, too. Facilities engineering, human resources, education, and other areas have centralized leadership with decentralized leaders at the tactical level.

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Leadership structures

Vertical and horizontal integrated leadership – mixed management – applies to hospitals, factories, plants and other facilities. How vertical facility leadership integrates with horizontal functional area leadership varies because each facility in the system has its own internal chain of command directing its facility-specific functional area leadership. Functional area leadership must balance system initiatives with facility priorities -- and both must maintain the value of safety. If neither applies a focus on safety, it can easily be lost in the day-to-day gridlock of operations.

Leadership limits

If top vertical leadership either declines or does not know how to develop a safety culture through continual hazard identification, assessment and control, and the processes and programs that integrate this culture throughout their vertical organizations, horizontal leadership at the system or functional level does not have the authority to redirect efforts. When functional area leadership exists in an overall vertical structure and is accountable to the local leadership, horizontal macro-leaders do not have the ability to adjust metrics and indicators to ensure that safety is given its due diligence.

It is easy for both vertical and horizontal leaders to bypass the hard, arduous process of developing a safety culture. They may think the other functional area leadership is working on it. They may have competing priorities. This is a dangerous proposition because safety should not be a priority, but a value. When one or even a few centralized safety professionals attempt to maintain a focus on the value of safety against the powerful tide of everyday operations, system initiatives and compliance standards — that may or may not direct resources toward safety — it is easy for safety to be pushed to a back burner.

Safety must be embedded

Ultimately, a typical mixed (vertical and horizontal) management structure creates efficiency and effectiveness in operational capacities. But it can easily steamroll a safety culture. But if both horizontal and vertical structures maintain safety as a value and safety exists in valuable key performance indicators, the possibilities are endless for continual improvement. With these prerequisites, even only a few, centralized safety professionals can fine tune processes and stoke the fires that create safe conditions and influence safe

behaviors. When this occurs, everyone benefits.

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References

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