

Strategic Planning in Safety: Developing an Effective Safety Culture-Change Strategy

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Introduction

Although battling inertia to transform a safety culture is a difficult and daunting challenge, it's an achievable goal. The following example illustrates how an organization applied effective strategic planning — with volunteer cross-functional committees — to enlist the support of upper management, prioritize safety-improvement goals, and establish a change process that will help them to achieve a sustainable zero-incident workplace.

Safety as a key to good business

Most organizations may say they value life and limb, but the brutal reality is that many find it difficult to commit necessary capital, processes, and empowered employee resources to safety. A multi-year plan to improve quality, production and delivery (customer service) is expected by most organizations. A strategic approach to achieve greater market share keeps departments headed for common goals. Quality assurance dedicates ongoing processes to reach zero-error performance, and the vision for customer satisfaction benchmarks extend well beyond regulatory requirements. By comparison, safety is often relegated as a chore — important, but not mission critical nor does it employ the same business focus as cost, quality and customer service.

Organizations that limit their safety plans to compliance training, observation programs, and recognition initiatives typically fail their safety performance. Too often, the approach to safety is more tactical than strategic. It involves few decision-makers versus many, and measures undesirable outcomes (injury statistics) versus positive (culture excellence) performance characteristics. Such a shortsighted, short-term approach keeps organizations stuck at a static injury-rate plateau. Some even refer to it as *faux safety*.

Why don't companies leverage proven "business-school" processes to achieve safety excellence? Why not apply strategy and planning tools to attain best-of-class safety? The fact is that these tools are readily available and we can apply them to safety successfully. A growing number of organizations that make a safety paradigm shift are able to benefit from their new safety performance and impact all aspects of the organization. The difficulty, of course, is getting started and overcoming the status quo — educating and getting traction. But once the effort breaks through, the advantages can be profound. Not only will companies begin to consistently

experience safety's integral relationship with quality, production, and delivery, they will also begin to see how strong safety performance significantly impacts the bottom line.

How are organizations able to make a change? They can start by applying the same proven strategic planning tools that have been growing businesses for decades. The following is an example.

Identify the Vulnerabilities

While injury and incident data — injury rates, types, audits and other downstream metrics — are readily available and a good place to start, a true assessment of the health of a safety culture demands an entirely different set of diagnostics and tools, which include:

- Self-Assessment with the Safety Maturity Grid
- Indicators of Impending Doom
- Roundtable discussions
- Personal interviews
- The Safety Perception Survey

Compliance and injury statistics provide a rearview-mirror perspective that can only react to the realities of the safety culture. These traditional metrics do not address the causes of the vast majority of all injuries, incidents and human behaviors. Nearly all unsafe acts are driven by the consistent ideas, beliefs and attitudes of the people in the organization. It's these beliefs and attitudes that reflect the norms of the people on the job. The norms — how we keep on doing things on a daily or regular basis — are perpetuated by the underlying culture of the workplace. Therefore, the key to lasting, sustainable improvement lies in changing the culture.

Culture can be defined as “what we do day in and day out with very little thought.” Changing the inertia of what's ingrained is a difficult task, but no more challenging than committing to other rigid standards that businesses regularly apply to their many practices in order to ensure long term sustainability and continuous improvement.

Overcoming Inertia

Because a company culture typically has been in place and reinforced for years, change is difficult. Initiating the daunting task of authentic culture change can only begin when you have established a baseline of your strengths and weaknesses so you have a “hit list” with which to target your efforts. Safety perception surveys and qualitative interviews provide excellent step-one tools to identify the safety culture realities, attributes and vulnerabilities and thereby begin the improvement process.

A roundtable brainstorming strategic discussion work group compiles the organization's strengths and weaknesses. The groups then establish how best to address the weaknesses, build upon the strengths and develop a viable action plan. Following is an example of how an organization prioritized its list of safety processes, “safety culture” indicators and moved forward.

Weaknesses (reality check)

Not enough safety resources
Compliance only focus
Systems underutilized
No continuous improvement teams
Poor corrective action closure

No standard safety processes
Shifting priorities
Poorly defined safety accountabilities
Job Hazard Analysis not utilized well
And more

Strengths (what we can build on)

Good EHS skills and team members
Facilities desire to improve
Strong compliance systems
Visible management in safety

Senior leadership support
Financial incentive to reduce injuries
People want to get involved
And more

Staying Focused

The process of developing strengths and weaknesses builds consensus and agreement within the work team. By doing so, it becomes easier for the group to establish a POP (Purpose, Outcomes and Process) statement to ensure a productive meeting and long-term results. The next step is to brainstorm an agreed upon Purpose statement. The team lists what is important to achieve, such as:

- We adopt necessary actions to eliminate injuries and their associated costs.
- We identify tasks that will prevent incidents and injuries.
- We no longer tolerate or accept injuries and incidents as part of our jobs.
- We continuously develop a roadmap to deliver a zero-injury culture.

From these initial attempts the team decided on: “Develop a roadmap to deliver a non-optional zero incident safety culture that can be lived by all our employees and save our company 3-500 injuries annually that carry \$100 million in associated costs.”

After deciding on a Purpose (or mini-mission statement), it is time to develop the Outcomes (measurable results) that will result from accomplishing the Purpose. Our case-study organization decided that they would focus on the delivery of the following:

Zero injuries
Standard, non-optional, value added EHS processes
All levels on employees engaged in appropriate safety activities

Well-defined safety accountabilities for each position
Proactive, upstream metrics
Employee developed systems and processes
And more

Prioritizing, Setting a Timetable

The next process in this strategic planning exercise is to converge the many potential outcomes into a single prioritized list of initiatives that will drive change. This is accomplished by “Pareto voting” which establishes the strategic planning group’s priority and timeline for their global organization’s efforts to begin changing the safety culture. It was decided that only about four major initiatives could reasonably be accomplished each year. Following is the resulting plan:

- Yr 1 Standard compliance process with appropriate training and execution
 Thorough root cause incident problem solving
 Rigorous Safety Accountabilities for all personnel
 “Professional Supervisor” development and training

- Yr 2 Inspections that have condition action item lists for tracking
 Continuous improvement training for safety
 Machine guarding excellence model
 New accountability execution safety metric system

- Yr 3 Solid value added JSAs for each operation
 New employee training
 PPE well defined and followed for each job
 Proven plant improvements circulated to all facilities

- Yr 4 Positive recognition of good safety performance for all employees
 A multifaceted communication system for the many tasks and processes in safety
 Audit that goes beyond compliance and into accountability execution
 Hazard recognition and correction
 Plant manager development and training

Power of Volunteers

This strategic planning process enlisted involvement and gained commitment from the participants who must be counted on for both analyzing the strengths and weaknesses, and reaching a mutually agreed-upon solution and implementation schedule. This approach achieves the buy-in that, in turn, is required to gain organization-wide commitment and dedicated resources necessary for executing the long-term plan.

As soon as the improvement priorities are established and the timetable documented, the tendency is to try to do too much too quickly. Over-zealous goals are susceptible to failure. Now is the time to establish a realistic pace and ensure that the improvements are systematic, and ground rules are set to accommodate changing priorities and their timing. For example:

- To move a strategic item from one year to another year requires a swap of another item
- Find a volunteer to take the new task
- Take it on yourself
- Hire someone else

With a plan in place, the organization presents the plan to upper management with an accompanying statement that guides the “culture change” vision:

“With current staffing, we will accomplish our strategy by enlisting the support of volunteers to lead safety process improvements that will help establish a sustainable company-wide zero-injury culture.”

Led by a series of safety action committees and support from management, the organization is on its way to achieving zero-incident performance.