

## **Management Support: What Do We Really Want?**

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### **Introduction**

Management support, we all say we want it, need it, and can't do our jobs without it. Saying that management support is essential for safety "success" has in fact become a safety profession mantra. A majority, 51.2% according to a 2002 ASSE survey, (Kendrick/Pater 2) of safety professionals, however, don't believe they receive that support. But what do we mean by management support and, more importantly, what should we really expect from our management and how do we go about getting it? Is asking for support even the right question? As a staff/support function shouldn't safety professionals really be asking what *they* can do to support management?

While there is nearly universal agreement among safety professionals regarding the importance of management support, there is scant agreement on just what that support should look like. Naturally, every employee wants and deserves the support of his or her management. Safety professionals are no different. We all want respect, decent remuneration and adequate resources to accomplish those tasks for which we are held accountable. What more do we want?

Looking back on a 40-year career that started in the safety engineering department of a large insurance carrier and is now winding down as a very part time safety consultant, I've naturally come to some conclusions regarding safety management. Coloring those conclusions is the more than 30 years I spent as a manager. My management roles ranged from directing plant safety and emergency response staff to corporate responsibilities for nuclear safety oversight, independent ES&H assessment, training, and quality assurance. My first budget in excess of \$1,000,000 was in 1981 and I know firsthand the challenges of safety responsibility for up to 200 employees. Further influencing my safety perspective are the 15 years I spent leading corporate oversight and assessment programs. This role included evaluation of corporate program effectiveness for everything from industrial and nuclear safety to maintenance.

My experience combining safety, management and assessment has led me to conclusions that often do not support traditional safety management efforts. Over the years I've come to believe that one of the principal reasons management fails to support safety is that we far too often ask them to support ineffective, and sometimes counterproductive, practices. Some safety professionals believe, for example, that management must, most importantly, enforce the safety rules and procedures. Others cite the importance of management in financing and paying lip

service to their pet projects ranging from behavior based safety (BBS) efforts to Voluntary Protection Program (VPP) certification. Worst of all, too many safety professionals seem to view management support as firm backing for their attempts to run the entire organizational safety effort – and, of course, compensate them handsomely for their efforts. Sadly, none of this “management support” is likely to drive any organization to safety excellence.

So what should we as safety professionals ask of our management? This presentation will suggest that what we should really want from management is good management – of safety! Instead of limiting management actions to memos and speeches in support of safety, what if safety professionals helped their management to effectively drive the safety effort like other important organizational objectives (e.g., production, quality, schedule, costs)? Most managers got to be managers because they were good at getting things done. The best of these managers recognized the importance of using a systems-based approach to reach their goals. That’s how they got to be managers. Why not encourage them to use the same approach for safety?

My long years in safety tell me, however, that there is often no safety *system* in place despite (in many organizations) a high level of expense and activity directed to safety. Random and unintegrated safety activity (“stuff”) – even a lot of it – doesn’t make a system, yet I find these expensive and unproductive approaches all the time. For some reason Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA) often isn’t applied to safety. This lack of a systems approach to safety frequently leads to management despair (where are the results?) and gives rise to adoption of supposed silver bullets like incentive programs that are now used by a majority of all US businesses (Prichard), VPP or ill-fated behavior based programs. Frequently all that is really needed is a more systems based management approach.

## **What Is a Safety System?**

Much has been written regarding the importance of managing safety as a system (see anything by Dan Petersen). The American National Standard, Occupational Health and Safety Management Systems (ANSI/AIHA Z10-2005) is an excellent reference and I don’t intend to compete with it here. A simple description of safety systems is appropriate, however, before going on with our discussion of management support.

Webster calls a system “a regularly interacting or *interdependent* (the emphasis is mine) group of items forming a *unified* whole.” Like any system, a safety system includes goals, objectives, measurement and feedback, accountability and routine tweaking for continuous improvement. All safety activities are designed to help meet the desired outcomes (e.g., goals) and interact with each other to help drive the system. The system is not static, however, but is constantly changing itself as it learns from experience and continually improves. Most commonly such systems are known as PDCA systems (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. PDCA Safety System**

Table 1 is an abbreviated look at what a PDCA safety system might contain. It is not intended as a safety system model.

Steps	Actions
<b>Plan</b>	<b>Establish safety goals and objectives (e.g., reduce “at-risk” employee behavior, increase the quantity of employee safety inputs, increase management involvement in safety) and the specific actions, responsibilities, resources, metrics and timeframes necessary to achieve them (e.g., develop an employee hazard identification process; initiate a management safety walk around program, etc.).</b>
<b>Do</b>	<b>Implement the planned actions, processes and individual responsibilities. Planned actions are routinely modified based on feedback and management review from the check process.</b>
<b>Check</b>	<b>Measure progress of actions and processes toward meeting goals and objectives (e.g., hazard identification process established, # of employee safety inputs, # of procedures modified based on employee input, management walk around system established, # of management walk arounds). Evaluate measurement data as well as feedback from manager walk around and accident investigations, employee input, accident data, independent assessment results, etc. and determine if modification to <i>any</i> of the system steps is indicated.</b>
<b>Act</b>	<b>Modify system steps based on the above analysis (e.g., modify “plan” objectives to include increased hazard recognition capability and training activities to accomplish this goal, modify “check” step to add a quality measure for management walk rounds, add goals for employee participation in safety problem solving teams. Etc.)</b>
<b>Line management reviews modifies and repeats the process</b>	<b>System implementation, evaluation and modification are ongoing for each PDCA step.</b>

**Table 1. Hypothetical PDCA Safety System**

Since most organizations want to stay in business, they have long recognized the importance of nurturing a PDCA system for their business imperatives. As a result these companies generally do a fine job of managing their production targets, budget, and a whole spectrum of business goals and objectives. They identify plans and actions considered necessary to meet their goals. Then they establish effective methods to measure their progress and hold managers accountable, based on this feedback. In short, these organizations have a management system to help them achieve their critical business goals and objectives. Inexplicably, however, many of these same organizations fail to manage safety in the same manner.

Safety professionals must help their management understand the importance of a systems approach to safety then design their own goals and objectives to support that system. Rather than performing every safety activity themselves they should instead focus on helping their organization develop and implement an effective safety management system. Training managers and the workforce in hazard recognition, accident investigation and how to work together in teams to solve organizational safety problems will pay far greater dividends than attempting to personally lead the entire safety effort.

## Why Management Doesn't Support Us

Safety professionals need to understand that managers, good ones at least, are extremely busy people. There are literally hundreds of issues competing for their time on any given day. Unhappy customers, personnel problems, tight schedules, supplier problems, cost overruns and equipment failures all demand immediate management attention. The safety professional must, therefore, establish itself as a management asset and problem solver if it hopes to get and hold management's attention. To succeed, we in the profession should spend at least as much effort seeking ways to support management as we do seeking management support. Traditionally, however, the safety profession has often acted as its own worst enemy. Even today I often see safety professionals who not only aren't providing meaningful management support, but are also promoting counterproductive safety practices. At the risk of stepping on some traditional safety toes, let's examine some of the reasons why management isn't listening to us, or supporting us, as we would like.

1. **We don't know who we are.** We continue to confuse safety staff responsibilities with line management responsibilities. To put it simply, management is line and safety is staff. This is not a subtle distinction. Even in decentralized organizations the line *owns* output (products, services, etc.). They are, therefore, also responsible for how that that output is produced – very much including quality, cost *and* safety. Safety professionals provide a staff function, i.e., they *support* the line. Line management controls, and is ultimately responsible for, all business functions, systems, organizational culture, and results – including regulatory compliance and worker safety. I could go on and on and on to demonstrate the line/support distinction but it really shouldn't be necessary. This is management 101. At the risk of repeating myself, however, line management owns the work and safety is simply a desired attribute of that work. It is not a separate function. The safety professional is a staff position whose role is to support line management to do work safely. Why then do so many safety professionals continue to call themselves safety managers or safety directors at the same time assuming ownership for nearly every aspect of the organizational safety effort? Is it any wonder we still commonly see job ads for safety positions with expectations, such as, “ensures compliance with all H&S regulatory requirements,” “ensures safe and continuous operations,” “implements all OS&H programs, policies and procedures,” “enforces health and safety regulatory standards,” and “manages health and safety and related compliance.”

These expectations are actually all line responsibilities and *no* staff safety professional could hope to meet them. No wonder management is so often disappointed in us.

Despite what should now be obvious, over and over again I see safety professionals attempting to own and control every detail of the organizational safety effort including establishment of objectives and programs, accident investigations, workplace inspections, program monitoring, and procedure development – to the exclusion of line management, and without meaningful workforce involvement. Unfortunately many managers have come to accept their subservient role. This codependency (more power to staff, less work for line) is counterproductive. You'll never get enough management support to succeed in leading safety from a staff position. You're just pushing a rope and may, in fact, be standing in the way of your management from assuming their rightful safety responsibilities. Perhaps if we called ourselves safety advisors or consultants rather than safety managers there would be less confusion and more success.

2. **Our rhetoric is counterproductive.** Over 25 years ago W. Edwards Deming told us in his 14 key management principals to “eliminate slogans, exhortations and targets”, as they “only create adversarial relationships.” (Deming 23) Deming also believed that organizational problems, including product defects and accidents, belong to the system and thus are beyond the control of the workforce. Despite such excellent advice from perhaps the greatest management thinker in history, we continue to bombard our employees with “motivational” rhetoric. Traditional safety slogans such as, “Get the safety habit,” “Think safety,” “Safety first,” “Safety is no accident,” “Safety is a state of mind,” and “Safety is priority 1” are as ubiquitous as they are meaningless. Sadly, they also serve to trivialize and isolate safety from the true mission of the organization. Management knows these slogans are hollow but often feels compelled to show their (halfhearted) support because we've always done it that way. Take “safety first” for example. Managers know this isn't true – and so do the employees. Businesses are formed to provide a product or service – at a profit. Producing that product or service, and the resulting profit is first, and priority #1. In fact, organizations that don't put production first are likely to fail. If you're working for a company that prioritizes anything over production and profit (which I seriously doubt) I'd suggest keeping your resume up to date.

Of all the traditional safety rhetoric I find the common comment that safety is, “just common sense” the most offensive. I still hear this frankly ridiculous statement not just from managers but from safety professionals who should clearly know better. If safety is just commonsense then many of us sure wasted a lot of time and money on our education and certification efforts. In fact, if safety is just common sense why bother to give it any management attention at all? And why are we spending money on these safety experts? Can't we just remind our employees (because they apparently lack our storehouse of commonsense) to be more careful? This perception relegates safety to a simple behavioral problem (see 5 below) readily fixable with motivational training and/or motivational speakers, disciplinary actions, incentives and “awareness” campaigns. No management safety system is apparently necessary. Would we ever say that production is just commonsense and trivialize it the way we do safety?

Isn't it better to view safety as something integral to production like quality and cost rather than something separate and apart from the real business mission? Consider how virtually every company deals with cost. No business decisions, from product design to business termination, are made without serious review of the associated costs. This is done routinely and without the aid of childish “Think cost” slogans or a series of new acronyms

announcing the latest corporate cost control program. Rather, cost considerations are completely integrated into the business model. This should be the goal for safety as well. Management support for unbelievable and/or embarrassing rhetoric, however, continues to stand in the way of safety integration.

3. **We too often look for quick fixes and gimmicks** rather than good management to provide safety results. It seems like we are always seeking some silver bullet to improve safety performance. We spend tens of millions of management's scarce safety dollars on posters, hats, jackets, coffee mugs, key chains and contests. We spend even more on off-the-shelf safety "solutions" sold by an endless array of vendors and safety consultants. As of January 6, 2010, I found 9,600,000 web results for "safety solutions" and over 800,000 for safety incentive programs. Many of these self-proclaimed safety solutions make highly seductive promises. Consider this vendor claim, "Safety awareness ...reduced accidents by 70%," this most impressive result was supposedly achieved via posters and various communications/awareness products. Equally tempting is this promise from a BBS provider, "40-75% injury reductions within the first 12 months," and from an "incentives" provider, "average reduction in losses of 40% in the first year." Similar promises from the quick fix vendors are virtually limitless and it is easy to understand why some managers might take the bait. Unfortunately many of these silver bullets fail - at great cost to the credibility of the overall safety effort. When much ballyhooed quick fixes turn out to be neither quick nor fixes, you are left with a more cynical workforce - and management. Their future support is, as a result, much harder to secure.

Doing safety stuff, even if it's good stuff, is not the same as having a management safety *system* to ensure long-term success and continuous safety improvement. VPP is a case in point. It's probably not fair to lump VPP certification with other vendor supplied safety "fixes" but neither is VPP a safety panacea nor a complete safety system. VPP recommends elements of a system (e.g., accountability, management planning and objectives) but is not itself a PDCA process for continuous improvement. VPP elements such as employee participation, hazard reporting systems, training, etc. are all laudable safety activities but do not constitute a system. Other elements of VPP are of less obvious value such as quarterly inspections that emphasize work space rather than worker activities, emphasis on "disciplinary procedures" and evaluations limited to how well the elements of VPP are implemented rather than how well the safety system is actually performing. Unfortunately many organizations have come to view VPP certification as *the* safety end state. If your organization lacks some of the better VPP elements you'll probably improve your results by adopting them, but you shouldn't consider that adoption a guarantee of safety excellence. If you already have the important VPP elements in place, going for VPP certification may not be the best use of your safety time and can lead to complacency when certification is achieved. The apparent principle benefit of VPP certification is avoidance of OSHA inspections. Why should any top performing company care about the remote possibility of an OSHA inspection?

Any safety intervention will likely provide some short term results if given enough attention. A high level of enthusiasm for the latest and greatest safety cure is hard to sustain for the long haul, however. When interventions are outside of a safety system that sets goals, responsibilities and accountability, and follow-up for continuous improvement, even short-term results are doubtful.

4. **We have oversold compliance.** Starting in the early 70s after the passage of OSHA, compliance became the ultimate safety goal for many organizations. Safety professionals

with their encyclopedic knowledge of safety requirements helped perpetuate the compliance fixation and looked to their management for support in enforcing every safety nit in the Code of Federal Regulations and the company safety manual, regardless of their importance to worker safety. Unfortunately compliance does not equal safety. Merely following the law is hardly a guarantee of exceptional, or even adequate, safety results. Compliance goals typically focus on conditions and requirements rather than safety system performance. Instead of emphasizing safe work practices and viewing compliance as a byproduct of an effective safety system, legalities (many of minor importance) take center stage. To borrow from my presentation at the 2008 ASSE Conference, “Imagine having a production goal that is limited to providing a workplace with all the tools and equipment necessary to produce a quality product and nothing more. Obviously you won’t ever see such a goal. Any organization that hopes to stay in business understands that you don’t just provide the conditions necessary for production and merely hope you get it. You must establish and proactively work toward production goals with plans and actions that keep you competitive and profitable. Yet, when it comes to safety, even organizations claiming that safety is “number one” frequently stress compliance over goal directed actions to drive safety excellence.” (Loud 5) No one likes a “safety cop,” and the safety professional’s lead role in ineffective compliance based safety efforts has left us with a persistent and unflattering legacy (remember the OSHA cowboy?).

5. **We have oversold behavior modification.** Due in part to an understandable backlash against compliance as the safety goal, employee behavior has become *the* target of many organizational safety efforts. If you accept that unsafe acts do in fact cause a lot (85%, 90%, ?) of injuries then it follows that modifying employee behavior from unsafe to safe is a laudable goal. Certainly a focus on behavior is more useful than our more traditional focus on conditions and compliance but in the process we seem to have turned safety performance into a psychology issue rather than its proper place as a management function. When this happens you are likely to see workers (Pavlov’s dogs?) manipulated through incentives, safety “awareness” programs, peer pressure and ever more and more motivational training. Often these efforts are conducted with little or no management involvement.

I’ve seen so many recent safety conferences, papers and safety journal articles extolling the virtues of behavior modification techniques perhaps we should change our name to the American Society of Safety Psychologists. Before we do, however, I think we should note carefully the serious problems with this approach. First of all, much of the literature and presentations promoting behavioral modification techniques is written by psychologists and those who also happen to market BBS products now used by a majority of all large companies. (Prichard 1) I’m not questioning the integrity of these people, which includes some of the most thoughtful professionals practicing safety today, but BBS bias is not surprising with such an obvious conflict of interest. Secondly, I strongly believe that unsafe behavior is more indicative of safety system deficiencies than a mere lack of worker motivation. Dan Petersen (a psychologist himself) told us over thirty years ago that “unsafe acts...and accidents are all symptoms of something wrong in the management system” (Petersen 27). Deming also believed that the vast majority of accidents are created via faults in the management system – beyond the control of the individual worker. If you agree with Dr. Petersen and Dr. Deming (and you should) doesn’t that make unsafe behavior a management issue? The current emphasis of safety as a behavioral problem has, however, led to many expensive BBS “solutions” that often leave management completely out of the loop. These person-centered solutions, like many BBS programs, tend to minimize the importance of root cause system and engineering (remember the “E” in ASSE?) solutions in favor of peer pressure and motivational interventions. In addition, these off-the-shelf fixes

are expensive, time consuming, difficult to sustain, and, too often, prone to failure. One BBS vendor explains unsuccessful BBS efforts as the result of management's failure to be "obsessed" with BBS implementation and for not making BBS implementation "number one on their values list." Assuming it is even possible to have managers obsess over a vendor supplied safety solution, is this really how we want our managers to support safety?

Lastly, our fixation on behavior has understandably led some managers to conclude that safety performance is a personal problem rather than an organizational problem. Then when our personal motivation techniques don't meet expectations we not surprisingly see management blaming the worker. Bad results must equal bad employees. Resultant "get tough" policies kill organizational trust and with it any hope of developing a strong organizational safety culture. Surely this is not the kind of management support we want. Successful managers don't address production, cost and quality as purely motivational issues. Why do we insist that they handle safety differently?

## Management Support That Matters

We don't always get the managers we want. There are certainly traditional top down, command and control managers and that don't manage anything very well, including safety. Dealing with this type of manager is a challenge but does give you a great opportunity to demonstrate a better way. There is generally a very large margin for improvement here and a strong, and successful, safety effort can actually help reform the entire management approach. I also know, however, that there are still some managers that don't care about safety (because they don't care about their workers), and never will despite your very best efforts. If this describes your management my best advice is to move on to a better place. Your job is probably in jeopardy anyway. Why should management pay your salary if they don't care about safety?

My experience tells me, however, that managers who don't care about their people are uncommonly rare. As a rule they don't get to be managers and if they do they don't last long. On the contrary, a 2001 study by Liberty Mutual reported that 95% of business executives believed that workplace safety is good for their company bottom line. Sixty-one percent of these executives believed that they got at least three dollars in payback for every dollar invested in workplace safety (Liberty Mutual). If managers truly believe that safety is good business then getting them to do "the right thing" should be easy. But what is the right thing?

After 40 years of observing both successful and unsuccessful safety efforts I've come to believe that we need only three things from our management to obtain and sustain safety excellence. Here's the support for safety I want from management and what I tell managers anytime I get a chance.

1. **Own safety.** This ownership cannot be delegated. Don't attempt to farm it out to safety specialists, consultants or employee committees. Only senior management can make safety an organizational value and part of the culture. Maximize your resources, including safety staff and your employees, to help you succeed but stay actively and visibly involved. Recognize that just as you own production you also own how that production is achieved. Production, quality, cost – and safety, are all your responsibilities. Safety problems are your problems. Therefore assume a meaningful role in incident investigations and in workplace/worker observations. Get the training you need to maximize your effectiveness. Ensure that all your managers do the same. Get out of the office and see what your workers are doing. Use these walkarounds to partner with your employees to identify ways you can



work together to help them perform their work more safely. Many high safety performance companies believe these on the floor employee interactions are the single most important action managers can take to promote safety. No amount of employee training or memos from you and/or the safety department will pay a bigger dividend than your visible good example and commitment. Employees look to you to act as the leader of the organizational safety culture. Lastly, be very skeptical of any quick fix safety solution, especially if it takes safety management out of your hands or requires you to handle safety differently than your other top business priorities.

2. **Manage safety like it's important.** Make sure you have integrated safety into every aspect of your business from design and procurement to facility shutdowns. If you don't build safety into your business functions you'll later find safety in competition with them. Like quality, safety is merely part of the work process that is your ultimate responsibility. Don't let it get separated.

The systems you use to ensure other important business objectives are met will also work for safety. Ensure that you and your management team meet routinely to personally discuss safety issues and progress – like you do for other important business objectives. Ensure timely and appropriate corrective action where indicated continuously. Your employees expect and deserve prompt attention to their concerns and suggestions for improvement. In short, expect and lead continuous safety improvement.

3. **Involve your employees.** Safety may be your ultimate responsibility but you can't manage it by yourself. I have not seen top safety performance in any organization that did not have active and widespread engagement of the workforce in the effort. Top safety performers, including much of the commercial nuclear industry and DuPont, recognized years ago that employees aren't the safety problem; they are the safety solution. Rather than attempting to manipulate their employees with incentives and gimmicks these companies engaged their workforce. Such companies expect, and get, the large majority of their safety input (i.e., opportunities for improvement) from their workers. They actively solicit and respond promptly to this input because they know it is in their best interest to do so. Managers in these companies understand that since their employees are the ones closest to the actual work, they are the ones best suited to serve as the eyes and ears of safety. Rather than sticking their workers on traditional and isolated safety committees that add scant value, they use their employees in teams to work on real organizational safety issues and problems. Employees are given genuine opportunities to influence their own safety by helping design their work environment, policies and work procedures. This involvement clearly demonstrates to the workforce that they are respected and taken seriously. As a result they are much more likely to work safely – and more productively.

If you and your other line managers aren't already leading the safety effort with active participation, improvement is not going to happen overnight. The point is to get started and don't stop. First you'll need a plan for establishing an effective PDCA safety system and then the will to make it happen. You may well find that you just need to work smarter rather than harder.

Still, when faced with new challenges managers often ask me what they should “take off the table” to give safety more support. I tell them I want them to take accidents and unexpected shutdowns off the table. I want them to take distrustful, cynical and unproductive employees off the table. And I want them to take unanticipated mistakes and expenses off the table. By removing these unwanted outcomes they'll better protect the workforce, save money, increase production and help foster employees who are eager to help find better, faster, cheaper - and safer

ways to do their work. That's the organizational payback for proactive safety management. Smart companies know it's worth the effort.

## Conclusion

It's time for both managers and the safety profession to grow up and get serious about safety. Safety professionals need to quit viewing themselves as victims of unresponsive management and start a concerted effort to understand and support management's prerogatives. The safety profession must also back away from traditional practices that have alienated management and start helping line managers see safety not only as important but also responsive to the same plan, do, check, act process that works so well for other management priorities. This will require a significant change in approach by many safety practitioners. Old habits, especially bad ones, die hard. For too long we've relied on a "bread and circus" approach to safety and let our safety staffs attempt to lead the safety effort single handedly. Sometimes this approach is driven by a desire for self importance but more often it results from a perception of management indifference (i.e., lack of support). While safety professionals should demonstrate their genuine concern for employee welfare, it is far more useful for management to send this message.

The main role of the safety function should be to provide the best possible guidance to line managers who alone possess the authority and the responsibility to achieve a best in class safety culture. Safety professionals need to stop trying to do all things safety and instead use their expertise and good judgment to support management in doing the right thing. Both managers and safety professionals need to recognize that unsafe work practices (and unsafe conditions) are merely symptoms of weaknesses in the overall safety system. Getting to the root causes of these system deficiencies drives continuous safety improvement and ultimately benefits the entire organization.

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