

Beyond Safety... Identifying and Overcoming the Barriers that Prevent Organizational Safety Performance Excellence

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Introduction

There are numerous tangible and intangible “barriers” that can have a significant impact on organizational safety and health performance. Many of these barriers are easily visible while others are hidden deep within the culture of the organization. They act to cause or contribute to human error, risk situations and/or unsafe work environments.

For organizational performance to be maximized, these barriers must be identified and successfully addressed. However, too often, safety and health professionals are focused on addressing the outcomes of these barriers and not their cause. Consequently, much effort and resources are expended in recognizing, evaluating and controlling unsafe worker actions and unsafe work environment conditions while the true root causes of these issues remain unaddressed.

Identifying and properly addressing these barriers within an organization is critical to the effectiveness and sustainability of its safety and health management system. These “organizational barriers” and the successful ways of dealing with them will be discussed in this paper.

Safety Management “*Truths*”

Before we begin discussing the “organizational barriers to safety excellence, some grounding with respect to fundamental safety management truths is necessary. The first truth is that Safety Management isn’t about preventing accidents. However, it is really about management learning how to better manage. Organizations that desire to attain excellence in safety and health need to understand that Employees don’t come to work with the intention of getting hurt or killed. They do so for 2 reasons. First, management didn’t properly influence their behavior and second, management didn’t provide a safe work environment. The bottom line is that management is obligated to protect their workers because in many cases they won’t protect themselves! Many workers trade-off their personal safety for a paycheck everyday, unless management steps up and intervenes in the behaviors that lead to most incidents.

Along, those lines, without proper role delineation and execution, safety and health performance can be managed... but never maximized. Before management decides to step up, they must first understand their roles and how to execute their roles effectively. *Effective management behaviors...will ultimately produce desired employee behaviors in safety.*

Another safety management truth is that management and supervision *at all levels* must be held to a high standard for safety excellence to be realized. The correct management and supervisory behaviors won't be exhibited naturally. They must be learned and practiced. Along with this it must be considered that strong incentives and disincentives will be needed to guide managers and supervisors safety management behaviors and outcomes!

Another safety management truth is that productivity, quality and financial return can never be maximized without achieving safety performance excellence first in any organization. The real bottom line is that worker safety and health is not an economic issue...*it's really an ethics issue!*

Finally, the last safety management truth is that organizations that attain safety performance excellence look much deeper than what appears on the surface. Organizations that continue to struggle with effectively managing safety performance need to look much deeper and well beyond the typical safety issues confronting them every day. When they do, the answers will be more than obvious.

The “Organizational Barriers”... Preventing Safety Performance Excellence

Organizational barriers that often prevent excellence in safety performance fall into several different categories. Individually and collectively, they can prevent an organization from attaining excellence and also derail those performing well. The following will highlight these barriers:

Production Output Barriers

Production output barriers are varied in their ability to promote individual and organizational risk taking. If they remain unchecked, organizations (both their management and individual workers) will take on unnecessary risk. These production output barriers include:

- Unregulated production output... *quantity of work produced*
- Unregulated production output... *pace or work*
- Unrealistic production goals or quotas
- Unrealistic production schedules
- Rate based employee production incentives
- Improperly allocated time to perform specified tasks

External Barriers

External demand barriers can also have a profound effect on organizational safety performance. External forces precipitated by customers, the public as well as those created by individual workers, can permit an organization and their management to expose workers unnecessarily to risk. These external factors include:

- Unrealistic customer deadlines
- Unrealistic customer specifications
- Board of Director /Stockholder demands e.g., downsizing, stock performance

- Public demands
- Secondary employment

Personnel Barriers

Personnel related barriers can put organizations and their management into precarious positions. These important human resource issues, if not carefully assessed and managed, can promote a risk tolerant culture. Sometimes these issues result from the organization trying to solve another problem; however, when they do so, additional exposure to employees and the overall organization is created. These personnel barriers include:

- Using less experienced or unskilled workers for wage-benefit savings
- Cutting labor allocation to reduce wage-benefit costs
- Uncontrolled and/or excessive overtime
- Substantial wage incentives paid to attract labor
- Substantial wage incentives paid for overtime work
- Inadequate work/rest regiments
- Erratic work schedules e.g., swing shifts
- Overtaxing the *physical* limitations of workers
- Overtaxing the *mental* limitations of workers
- Unrealistic policies e.g., absenteeism, return to work

Worker Self Imposed Barriers

Workers place themselves at risk on the job often. Some examples of this behavior include:

- Accepting high hazard employment for economic reasons
- Succumbing to "peer pressure", e.g. iron workers not using fall protection
- Exhibiting personal pressure...or a "hero mentality" when confronting risk situations
- Demonstrating a self imposed work ethic to protect employment or company
- Ignoring of risk after it is known

Financial Barriers

Financial barriers can affect organizational safety performance significantly. These barriers are ones dealing with the focus of the organization and its management, the resourcing of EHS activities, and policies that promote risk taking. These include:

- Obsessive management focus on the financials
- Management compensation based heavily on production output or revenues generated
- Underfunding of preventative maintenance, capital improvement, operating budgets e.g., *Lean*
- Underfunding of EHS initiatives... staffing, budgets, training, equipment, etc.
- Blanket no-overtime policies
- Mindless budget reduction mandates

Communication Barriers

Communications play a very important role in shaping a safety culture. What management says verses what it does can affect how managers, supervisors, and workers think and act with respect to avoiding and minimizing risk. Communication type issues that need to be considered include:

- *Untrue* or unsupported Safety Philosophy statements

- Cultures that say “Safety is First” but demonstrates that it is not really a “do more with less,” “take risk,” “run lean” ...but “*be safe*” culture
- *Imbalanced* management communications focused heavily on *production* goals and/or financial results
- Invisibility of EHS performance in annual financial reports

Role Alignment Barriers

Proper role alignment is critical for successful safety performance. Line management must understand their roles. Conversely, EHS staff personnel also need to understand their roles and avoid performing line management safety activities if success is to be attained. Roles and responsibilities at all organizational levels need to be clearly established and executed. The following barriers need to be addressed to enhance a lackluster safety culture:

- Senior management is *plainly indifferent* to it’s safety management obligations
- Senior management *intentionally disregards* it’s safety management obligations
- Management-supervision EHS roles are undefined, unclear, and unaccepted
- EHS staff personnel performs line management’s EHS work for them

Training Barriers

Training of management, supervision, and employees is critical for attaining and sustaining safety performance excellence. Management and supervision need training on their safety roles. These roles are just not “already known” by them. They also need to be trained on how to master these roles. Again, these skills are not always present. Workers also need ample training if they are to be expected to understand risks, how to avoid them, and how to deal with them successfully. Barriers found in many organizations that are preventing them from attaining excellence include:

- Managers and supervisors are not formally trained re: EHS roles and execution
- Less trained workers are used due to cost savings
- Workers not trained regarding task specific hazards e.g., heavy reliance of on-the-job training processes
- Ineffective training methods and/or validation of training comprehension

Safety Governance Barriers

Safety governance in the workplace is a multi-faceted problem. Some organizations and their individuals operate like the “wild west” with respect to what is deemed acceptable from a safety behavior compliance perspective. Some organizations continually buck the regulators and the regulations. Related barriers often found in these organizations include:

- A lack of explicit rules and procedures, *strong* enforcement, and/or *serious* consequences
- A failure to maintain regulatory compliance
- The existence of a “minimal compliance... just clear the hurdle” culture
- Outright ignorance of regulatory requirements
- A lack of regulatory compliance auditing

Individual Performance Barriers

Many organizations do not attain safety performance excellence because they haven’t created and maintained a simple culture of discipline. In those organizations, the following barriers are noted:

- A tolerance of frequent flyers or unsafe workers
- An admiration for “cowboys and risk takers”

- A lack of enforcement of Zero-tolerance
- A lack of accountability for underperforming employees to change or improve.

Management Accountability Barriers

A lack of formal and structured accountability mechanism is a substantial barrier for many organizations. A lack of strong accountability often works against the goal of getting line management to accept and fully execute their safety responsibilities. Barriers related to this include:

- Safety being MIA from position descriptions, performance reviews, salary and bonus allocation systems, and promotion reviews processes
- Safety performance having “minimal weight” within above
- Management accountability being *all talk and no action*
- Underperforming managers and supervisors not being *challenged*

Inadvertent Management Action Barriers

Management rarely intends to place workers at risk. But what they do or don't do at times causes workers to engage in at risk behaviors. Examples include:

- Requiring 24/7 worker communications responses causing increased stress and fatigue levels
- Calling or texting subordinates while driving
- Promoting a culture of excessive travel
- Failing to impose safety rules to prohibit risk-taking behavior, e.g. texting or cell phone use while driving
- Permitting alcohol to be served at company sponsored functions without assuring those in attendance will not drive

Cost Ownership Barriers

Who owns the cost for incident losses in an organization says a great deal about who owns the safety responsibility. The inability to assess costs for losses will ultimately hamper safety ownership in any organization. Additionally, understanding the true cost of losses remains a mystery for many individuals in managerial positions. Organizational barriers in this area include:

- Management being uninformed re: true accident cost impact
- No process for incident cost charge-backs...a *Pot O' Gold* exists
- No future budget penalty allocation for poor performance

Performance Measurement Barriers

Effective performance objective and goal setting, and the ongoing measurement of leading and trailing indicator performance are necessary to drive improvement and to produce excellent safety performance results. This is a two-fold problem for many organizations. First, goals and objectives are often focused on trailing indicators of safety performance. Second, subordinate safety activities (leading indicators) that facilitate organizational safety performance improvement and excellence are not being closely monitored on a continual basis. Specific organizational performance measurement barriers include:

- Established safety goals being unrealistic
- Safety goals being broad and not focused
- Safety goals not being understood

- *Trailing* performance measures being used as the primary *measure of success*
- *Leading* indicator performance not being reported and monitored in “real time” at all levels

Performance Recognition Barriers

Both “carrots and sticks” are needed to promote acceptance of safety management responsibilities and produce performance results. The “carrots” needed are just as important as effective deterrents. Strong recognition and rewards are necessary to promote individual and organizational safety performance excellence. However, both "carrots" and "sticks" need to focus on leading and trailing performance indicators to be effective.

Recognition should never occur following catastrophic events. I recently learned that several executives received handsome safety bonuses for lowering an OSHA rate during the same year where a catastrophic event occurred. What occurred does not meet the sanity test! Carrots should never "pay out" following one of these events regardless of the safety performance attained by an individual or organization. Organizations that struggle with safety performance recognition are typically plagued by the following:

- *Managers and supervisors* not being appropriately recognized or rewarded for personal safety performance
- *Employees* not being appropriately recognized or rewarded for personal safety performance
- Safety incentives are used to motivate behavior and used in lieu of an effective safety management system
- Rewards or cost savings are not being fairly shared with the workers, managers or supervisors who produced them
- Inappropriately recognizing individuals or the organization *after a catastrophic event*

Political Barriers

Politics is present in every organization at every level. Politics can derail a safety culture quickly if not nipped in the bud. Some political barriers include:

- Closed door senior level manager decision making process
- EHS staff being considered a necessary evil and *not really on the team*
- EHS staff being considered the enemy... *pushback is evident*
- *Lack of management courage demonstrating unbending expectations...* caused by a lack of superior or staff function support or a fear of worker or peer retaliation

Deal Silence Barriers

Dead silence...*or the inability of people to speak up when they know things are wrong* is a serious barrier found in many organizations. Similar to political barriers people become fearful to be heard. Consequently

- Unresolved serious issues...*remain resolved due to:*
 - a lack of courage to speak up
 - a lack of ability or skills to communicate concerns in a way that can be heard
 - fear of reprisals...and/or job loss
 - fear of being shunned by the “in crowd”

Overconfidence Barriers

Sometimes there is overconfidence about the safety performance of the organization. This overconfidence is often driven by the fact that:

- The organization's statistical safety performance is better than average
- All regulatory safety and health requirements are being met
- Serious or catastrophic events are very rare or have never occurred

Risk Acceptance Barriers

Some organizations develop a risk tolerant culture and begin acting in ways that place employees at enormous risk.

- Promoting an *acceptable risk* culture without the supporting research
- Believing that it will never happen in the first place... *or if it does, it never will occur again*
- Exposing human life to peril... *for the sake of the greater good*
- Acting the same way... *after lives have been lost or workers have been injured*

Focus Barriers

A lack of organizational focus on what has been causing or has the potential to cause incidents can also become a stumbling block for organizations. These include:

- Wasting valuable energy and resources *to resolve insignificant safety issues*
- Trying to solve too many safety issues *simultaneously*
- Constantly *fighting fires*
- Going in too many directions *programmatically*
- Not converging resources on the *big ticket issues*

Ethical Barriers

Ethical barriers are found in many organizations, which ultimately cause worker risk taking. These barriers include:

- Demonstrating a "*minimum compliance*" culture
- *Ignoring* regulatory requirements outright
- *Discouraging* regulatory compliance auditing
- *Intentionally under-reporting* of regulatory performance or incidents

Managerial Ignorance Barriers

The final and most important barrier found in organizations deals with management ignorance. Management rarely intends to harm workers or put them at risk. However, in many instances they do so unintentionally as a result of their words and actions or lack thereof. In these barriers:

- Management doesn't care to look for barriers... and become *plainly indifferent*
- Management knows about a barrier but *continues to ignore it ... resulting in intentional disregard*
- Management makes strategic decisions *without considering the negative safety and health consequences the decisions may create*

A thorough understanding of these barriers at the senior management level is necessary to overcome them successfully! These barriers cannot be properly addressed and overcome at other organizational levels or functions without the strong and ongoing influence of senior management! There are some simple questions senior managers can ask themselves when confronted with decisions that may ultimately create a barrier to safety excellence. These include:

1. Does this barrier increase risk to the workers or the operation?
2. What are the ethical ramifications of not resolving this barrier?
3. What would I do about this barrier if my spouse or child were employed within the organization?
4. What would I do if I had a crystal ball and saw this barrier leading to a fatality or a catastrophic event?
5. If this barrier led to a fatality or catastrophic event, what possible negative affect could it have on the:
 - *The stated values/safety philosophy of the organization*
 - *The EHS culture of the organization*
 - *The ROI to shareholders*
 - *The business reputation*
 - *The public and / or community*
 - *The relationship w/ regulators, customers, strategic partners*

Overcoming the “Organizational Barriers”

The barriers preventing any organization from attaining safety performance excellence can be overcome. The following 7 steps for attaining safety excellence can be employed successfully in any organization. These steps form the roadmap for success.

Step 1- Define Reality

Any organization interested in attaining safety excellence needs to first understand where it stands and what needs to be addressed. Essentially, you need to look for “*what’s broke*”.

This can be done using two primary methods including:

- *Safety Climate Survey conducted by an external 3rd party*
- *On-site Current State Assessment conducted by an external 3rd party*
- *Internal strike teams*

Note: Barriers with respect to effective safety management will need to be proven to the decision makers...consider the internal implications of this and your capability of “telling the emperor he has no clothes”.

Step 2 - Get Extremely Focused

To attain excellence, the organization and its management must constantly focus on “what” or most frequent unresolved injury potentials and most severe unresolved injury potentials, e.g. barriers to excellence. This needs to be done in an effort to properly determine which specific “*organizational barriers*” could be having the biggest impact. Unfortunately most organizations are focusing on numerous safety issues simultaneously effectively causing a lack of focus. Only after these are determined can the next logical step of developing potential solutions.

Step 3- Enlighten Senior Management

Senior managers in the organization need to be informed continually of any and all organizational barriers precluding safety performance excellence and risk taking. They have legal, moral and ethical obligations to deal with these issues. Most senior managers are clueless re: how “organizational barriers” are affecting safety performance. Frankly, they need to be advised and then draw their own conclusions and react accordingly.

Step 4- Let Senior Management Clear the Hurdles

Senior managers are in the best position to deal with organizational barriers once they are advised they exist. These issues are not small or inconsequential and need the position power of the senior manager for successful evaluation and resolution.

There are several ways to get senior managers to step up and begin the process of addressing these issues in a systematic way. First, establish a safety leadership team allowing the senior leader to use his or her position power to facilitate the evaluation and resolution of these barriers through the utilization of existing internal staff and line management resources. Once the team is established, address the “organizational barriers” one by one. The first areas needed to be worked on are role alignment, accountability and governance. These areas will form the foundation of the new safety culture.

Step 5 – Establish Clear Accountabilities and Expectations

Along with the above step, there will be a need to define safety management accountabilities and to establish clear expectations at all organizational levels to resolve each barrier. Policies, procedure etc. may need to be modified and performance expectations must become crystal clear for everyone in the organization if there is any expectation that the barrier will be resolved.

Step 6 – Closely Measure and Monitor Performance

Critical to successfully overcoming the barrier will require close monitoring of any positive or negative change that occurs. Successful measuring and monitoring methods include: the use of safety climate surveys, onsite interviewing assessments, physical audits to discern progress made or lack thereof. Additionally, results must be “pipelined” to senior management directly on a frequent basis so they can take the necessary action if progress is not occurring as planned.

Step – 7 Address Strategic Decision-Making

The last step in this process is to prevent these barriers from resurfacing in the future. To do that, long-term strategic decision-making will need to be evaluated. Following this evaluation, a process will need to emerge that requires decisions affecting the risk of workers or the work place to “pass muster” in some meaningful way. Suggested methods include: establishing a “devils advocate” review team, the development and implementation of a strategic decision-making model, anointing EHS leaders as the “protected moral compass”...without fear of reprisal from any level, etc.

Conclusion

Safety performance is the *single most effective* measure of excellence in any organization. ***But unfortunately safety performance excellence still eludes many if not most workplaces.*** The sad realities of American worker safety are that nearly 50 American workers are injured every minute of every hour. Nearly 24,000 workers are injured every 8 hour work day in the U.S. And, over four decades since the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, only about 30 percent of businesses have established safety and health programs and only a very small percentage of those have effective safety management systems. These sad realities will remain unchanged unless we address the fundamental organizational barriers causing much of those deplorable statistics.