

MAKING SAFETY A Strategies for Transform

By Earl Blair

CAN A RADICAL FOCUS by leadership in one area such as safety help establish other good habits that result in transformational benefits? The author suggests that making worker safety a keystone habit has the potential to build an organization's culture while simultaneously reducing injuries and unwanted incidents. A keystone is the wedge-shaped stone at the crown of an arch that locks the other stones in place and has a major impact on a building as it upholds the structure. Similarly, a keystone habit locks other positive habits in place.

The Importance of Keystone Habits

In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg (2014) postulates that by changing habit routines, we can transform our lives. He explains that by focusing on a pattern to change a single habit, it is possible to reprogram other routines in one's life. He calls these habits "keystone habits."

Habits can be individual and corporate. In organizations, regular and customary practices are habits. Habits encompass the concepts of patterns, routines and customs. A large part of an organization's culture is based on the regular habits practiced by its people.

A keystone habit can make a major impact on an organization's culture by influencing the development and continuance of habits that are important to the organization.

How Habits Can Transform Performance

Small habits can make a big difference. This applies especially well to leaders because they can improve their effectiveness by leveraging small changes that lead to remarkable results. Even small, single-percentage improvements that may not be particularly noticeable can lead to astounding results when practiced over time. The impact of habits compounds over time, like compound interest in economic terms. This principle can make a significant difference for both individuals and cultures (Clear, 2018).

Why are keystone habits so powerful? Keystone habits have a major impact beyond the specific habit that is

practiced. When an organization places a radical emphasis on safety by doing things right, this may influence quality, efficiency and profits. Duhigg (2014) observes that this keystone safety habit "explains how Alcoa became one of the best performing stocks in the Dow Jones index, while also becoming one of the safest places on earth" (p. 101).

Why Focus on Safety?

Worker safety is a keystone habit that might be the one thing that pulls an organization together and creates a ripple effect that influences the broader culture. This is a main reason O'Neill chose to focus on safety. Application of safety as a keystone habit may be especially appropriate for organizations in high-hazard industries.

Prior to accepting the position as CEO of Alcoa in 1987, Paul O'Neill already had a reputation as a person who could make changes happen. The question for O'Neill was how he could make the greatest impact on this company (Duhigg, 2014). He was searching for something that was important to everyone at the organization, and had the potential to bring people together and influence the culture from top to bottom.

O'Neill decided to focus on safety. He had 3 months to think about what his priorities should be before starting at Alcoa. As a young man, he had created a list of

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Making worker safety a keystone habit has the potential to build an organization's culture while simultaneously reducing injuries and unwanted incidents.
- Examining a significant case study from the past reveals the powerful impact of corporate habits on transforming culture and enhancing performance.
- This article examines benchmark strategies for consideration and potential application in various organizations.



A KEYSTONE HABIT

Improving Performance

what he wanted to accomplish in life, which included near the top “make a difference.” As leader of a large organization, he had an opportunity to do just that (Duhigg, 2014).

O’Neill made safety measures the primary indicator of senior leadership’s performance. This involved focusing on one thing of great value and advancing a keystone habit that creates a ripple effect or chain reaction, locking other good habits in place.

Focus on One Thing

A key to creating this ripple effect: Focus on one thing. The decision and ability to focus on one thing is a principle that is common to many highly successful individuals and organizations. Organizations that practice focusing on their one most important thing have achieved extraordinary results.

As described in Keller and Papasan’s (2012) book, *The ONE Thing: The Surprisingly Simple Truth Behind Extraordinary Results*, Gary Keller had his organization narrow down from 100 important things what the one most important thing was for them to do. They decided their one thing was for Keller to write a book on successfully selling real estate. The book became a bestseller and Keller Williams became the largest real estate company in the U.S.

Why is it so difficult to focus on one thing? The challenge is there are too many other things that “misguide

our actions and sidetrack our success” (Keller & Papasan, 2012).

Determining Worker Safety as the One Thing for Alcoa

O’Neill realized that he must select a focus that demonstrated unity and led employees to know in their hearts that the organization really cared for them. Krause (2005) notes that organizational culture change is a leadership issue and can start with safety. Krause makes several key points about O’Neill’s leadership:

- As CEO of Alcoa, O’Neill realized that “safety is an ideal place to start.”
- Furthermore, he realized that to transform the organizational culture at the aluminum giant, he would have to find a way to engage employees at all levels.
- This employee engagement had to occur in the context of cultural unity.
- Employees had to believe the organization really cared about what happened to them.

Let’s examine how O’Neill accomplished his remarkable achievements at Alcoa and strategies that can be applied from his leadership.

Strategy 1: Make Safety Measures the Primary Indicator of Performance

O’Neill did something extraordinary: He made safety outcomes the primary indicator of senior leadership’s performance. Over time, O’Neill’s plan transformed the culture at Alcoa. It became a “world leader in safety performance and set the stage for the kind of organizational functioning it needed to grow and prosper” (Krause, 2005, pp. 2-3).

The company enjoyed additional benefits that resulted from worker safety as the overriding priority from the top:

- greatly reduced injury rate in a hazardous industry
- improved employee morale
- strong company growth
- skyrocketing stock value

These successes relate to the keystone habit that locks the other habits in place. O’Neill understood that safety was the keystone habit that would drive overall performance to higher levels. This case indicates that a genuine focus on safety performance strongly influences other important elements of organizational culture (Krause, 2005).

To make safety the primary measure, O’Neill instituted automatic reporting that included a plan to prevent recurrence any time someone was injured. The unit president



had to report an injury to O’Neill within 24 hours and present a plan for making sure it never happened again. In addition, the only people promoted were those who embraced this system.

Strategy 2: Demonstrate Ongoing Respect for All Employees

O’Neill believed for an organization to be considered great, all employees needed to be able to answer “yes” without hesitation to three questions:

1. Can I say every day I am treated with dignity and respect by everyone I encounter regardless of my pay grade, title, race, ethnicity, religious beliefs or gender?
2. Am I given the things I need such as education, training, tools and encouragement so I can contribute to this organization that gives meaning to my life?
3. Am I recognized for what I do by someone I care about? (Charter Partners, 2015)

A culture of treating all employees with dignity and respect begins with management leadership. O’Neill believed treating employees with dignity and respect was a down payment on “Nobody ever gets hurt.” Treating people with dignity and respect demonstrates that leadership cares about the people they work with.

O’Neill understood that employees will not give discretionary energy if they do not feel respected and if they are not treated with dignity every day. Employees will go the extra mile and give all they have (discretionary behavior and energy) if they are treated with dignity and respect and if they feel they are valued by the organization.

Erickson’s (2008) research suggests a strong correlation between the way employees are treated and safety performance. In fact, her research indicates that the way employees are treated is the factor most significantly related to the level of safety performance. It was not a safety-related consideration that had the greatest impact, as safety professionals might tend to predict. Rather, treating employees with respect and dignity was more statistically significant than safety-specific endeavors. Erickson (2008) notes that this “was the most predictive factor in the level of safety performance.”

O’Neill demonstrated his respect for employees in two ways: by refusing to negotiate safety and by not budgeting safety. O’Neill was uncompromising when it came to respecting worker safety and made these comments:

•“I’m happy to negotiate with you about anything. But there’s one thing I’m not going to negotiate with you and that’s safety. If you want to argue with me about that, you’re going to lose.”

•“We aren’t going to budget safety. If there is a safety issue, you (management) are authorized to fix it and I’ll figure out how to pay for it” (Charter Partner, 2015).

O’Neill gave employees meaningful engagement and a voice:

•**Engagement:** Since leaders were measured primarily on safety, they depended on employees to help them achieve stellar performance. By assisting leaders in actively developing plans and ways to avoid injuries, employees were integrated into safety and became meaningfully engaged in the safety process.

•**Voice:** O’Neill also gave employees his home phone number to call if they had a safety issue. They knew they

could call him if they could not advance an issue beyond their immediate leadership. They also knew that he cared about their safety. He was a hero to them. Employees called him with safety concerns and eventually some employees also called O’Neill with general suggestions beyond safety that impacted organizational performance.

Strategy 3: Institute a Strategic Framework to Lock In Worker Safety as a Keystone Habit

O’Neill had a clear strategy that was based on a vision of zero injuries. His focus was primarily on strategy rather than on the details of specific programs. He measured the leadership on safety results. The leaders, as well as employees, clearly understood that he was serious about safety. Leaders knew that they needed to have an effective plan to prevent injuries. They also understood that their future at the organization was dependent on buying into safety and performing on behalf of worker safety.

Unfortunately, many organizations do not have an overall safety strategy. This often results in constantly reacting to unwanted incidents and sometimes having to make decisions in the midst of a crisis.

In the book *Forecasting Tomorrow: The Future of Safety Excellence*, Galloway and Mathis (2015) make predictions about the future of safety excellence including this one about safety strategy:

Organizations will move away from a programmatic and towards a strategic approach to safety. Organizations will develop overarching safety strategies and align them with business strategies, and all programs will be evaluated as to whether they fit and support the strategy. Leaders will no longer simply adopt programs to address problems. Strategy will drive safety efforts toward even more proactive actions and away from reactive firefighting mentality of the past. (p. 18)

Galloway and Mathis (2016) define inside strategy as “a framework of choices an organization makes to determine and deliver value.” They note that “a strategist needs to think ahead, be aware of current conditions, and imagine how small changes can lead to big effects” (pp. 4-6). Strategy is not a plan or a vision but asks what you want to happen and how we make it happen.

This author believes it is best for organizations to adopt a safety management system as part of their strategy to achieve safety excellence. Note that management strategy and management systems are not the same. O’Neill started with a strategy, then developed and implemented a system to make the strategy successful. Formal safety management systems had not been developed at the time of the O’Neill case study to the extent that they now exist with ANSI/ASSP Z10 and ISO 45001.

The author recommends one of the following standards or practices as a framework to complement the organizations’ strategies:

•ANSI/ASSP Z10.0-2019, Occupational Health and Safety Management Systems

•ISO 45001:2018, Occupational Health and Safety Management Systems—Requirements With Guidance for Use

•OSHA’s “Recommended Practices for Safety and Health Programs”

Sustaining Safety Performance

To sustain safety performance, O’Neill made safety an ongoing value in two prominent ways:

•He followed through on issues. Study why things go wrong in the work process and make corrections and adjustments.

•He made the safety habit easy to achieve. It is easier to do everything right, since doing work correctly is also safer work.

How did the worker safety habit transform Alcoa? The nature of a keystone habit is to make changes that ripple throughout an organization. This is what happened at Alcoa by focusing on the one habit of worker safety. Because O’Neill practiced an extreme focus on worker safety as the habit that mattered the most, this served as a lever to dislodge undesirable habits and remake new patterns in the culture. As Duhigg (2014) notes, “Keystone habits start a process that, over time, transforms everything. (p. 100).

To make this change that required an extreme focus on safety, the company had to make substantial changes in its habits and routines. The habit loop of cue-routine-reward was instituted by O’Neill for safety:

1. Cue: An employee injury occurred.

2. Routine: The unit president had to report to O’Neill within 24 hours and present a plan ensuring that the injury would never happen again.

3. Reward: The only people promoted were those who embraced this system.

These changes impacted the communication structure in the units. Business unit leaders were busy and they needed to be ready to respond to O’Neill with a prevention plan in the event of an injury. The units began seeking and collecting employee suggestions for developing these plans. There had been a rigid hierarchy at Alcoa when O’Neill became CEO, and this changed dramatically due to O’Neill’s vigorous emphasis on safety. The keystone safety habit helped the company build new corporate habits.

This case demonstrates that there is potential to transform an organization by focusing on worker safety. Duhigg (2014) observed three reasons why this safety habit transformed Alcoa:

1. The company celebrated small wins and followed up on issues.

2. The obvious, observable safety routines created structures that helped other habits to flourish, such as open communication and doing jobs right to avoid injury.

3. The worker safety habit created widespread culture change where new values became ingrained.

With characteristic humility, O’Neill attributed Alcoa’s success to its employees. However, the real key to the root causes of this success lies in the fact that when the company put such a powerful focus on worker safety, it was really focusing on caring for the people.

The details of this focus are encapsulated in the answers to O’Neill’s three questions for a great organization:

1. All employees were treated with dignity and respect every day; 2. all employees were given the tools and



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resources they needed to contribute and find significant meaning in their work; and 3. employees were recognized and rewarded for embracing the safety system.

Once the organization went the extra mile on behalf of employees, the employees returned the favor by giving what O’Neill called “discretionary energy.” Employees were inspired to do the right thing, to focus on safety and to make a meaningful difference.

Establishing Safety as a Core Value

Alcoa became a company where “safety first” was more than a slogan. O’Neill did not believe that safety should be a priority but a precondition. For example, “you have to breathe before you get up and walk around.” A precondition for doing work is that the work will be done safely. Employees who were not willing to follow the cardinal safety rules were terminated. Supervisors who knew about an employee’s unsafe behavior and looked the other way were also terminated. Everyone was expected to embrace the safety system so they could achieve the vision that “nobody ever gets hurt” (Charter Partners, 2015).

These safety values were expected to be enforced from top to bottom at the company. An internal audit O’Neill requested revealed that a site had corrected a rather serious hazardous incident but not reported it to the corporate office as the safety system required. O’Neill had the senior executive fired, a man who was considered a star at the company. Outsiders were shocked, but those inside the company knew that everyone was expected to embrace the company’s safety values.

It may be difficult and rather unusual to fire a person who has been a high performer for a long time at a company, but O’Neill had installed safety as a value that

dictated everyone buy into worker safety. As O'Neill told Duhigg (2014):

It might have been hard at another company to fire someone who had been there so long. It wasn't hard for me. It was clear what our values dictated. He got fired because he didn't report the incident, so no one else had the opportunity to learn from it. Not sharing an opportunity to learn is a cardinal sin. (pp. 124)

Achieving Results Beyond Safety

O'Neill's radical approach made worker safety an organizational habit that significantly transformed the organization's culture and improved performance. Regarding company profitability, "O'Neill never promised that his focus on worker safety would increase Alcoa's profits. However, as his new routines moved through the organization, costs came down, quality went up, and productivity skyrocketed" (Duhigg, 2014, p. 108).

From 1987 when O'Neill started at Alcoa to 2000 when he retired, the company's lost-time incident frequency rate improved from 1.86 to 0.12. During O'Neill's tenure, the number of employees quadrupled, sales went from \$4.9 billion to \$22.9 billion and market capitalization increased by 900% from \$2.9 billion to \$29.9 billion (Krause, 2005).

Caveats & Considerations

Lack of authority: Most safety professionals do not have the level of authority to do the things O'Neill did. However, one might consider making these or similar recommendations to top management if appropriate for the context. Any targeted habit should be customized to focus on only those actions that are relevant to the organization.

Potentially misguided: Just because a radical focus on safety worked for one leader and company does not mean it would work as well for every organization. An extreme focus on safety might seem inappropriate for an organization with low risks or is highly unlikely to experience severe injuries or fatalities. A different area of focus that the organization is passionate about such as quality, continual improvement or environmental affairs might make a better keystone habit for those organizations.

Consider what it takes: Such an approach takes courage, time, discipline, patience, persistence, execution and follow-through. Count the cost first.

Conclusion: How to Build Keystone Habits

Clear (2018) describes how to build habits in four steps and how Alcoa achieved making safety a keystone habit:

1. Make it obvious: O'Neill made it clear to the public and to all employees that safety was the overriding priority at the organization and took bold actions to achieve it.

2. Make it attractive: How did Alcoa make safety more attractive? For leaders, embracing the safety system made them eligible for promotion. For employees, it was tied to being treated with dignity and respect every day, being given the tools and resources needed to be successful, and being recognized for their efforts. For company stockholders, while the initial focus on safety was not particularly attractive, the financial results

during O'Neill's tenure were certainly attractive.

3. Make it easy: Facilitate a safer process; make it easier to work safely and more unattractive to take risky shortcuts. Alcoa gave employees the tools, resources and education to do their work safely. Doing the job right means doing it safely, resulting in doing a better job while doing it safely. Making it easy is also attractive to employees.

4. Make it satisfying: Employees were able to contribute in meaningful ways, management listened to them and looked to them for help, and leadership cared about them. Those who did not embrace this approach were released from the company. The safety as a keystone habit approach was a satisfying example of a win-win scenario for the company and its stockholders.

These strategies from the O'Neill case are not necessarily easy to implement, and they certainly do not constitute a quick fix.

But the upside potential is enormous for an organization that takes the hard work, the smart work and the discipline to instill worker safety as a keystone habit. As the case demonstrates, benefits can go beyond safety improvement and dramatically transform the culture and improve virtually every dimension of performance. **PSJ**

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Cite this article

Blair, E. (2023, April). Making safety a keystone habit: Strategies for transforming performance. *Professional Safety*, 68(4), 20-24.

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