

The Zero Index Organization: Safety as Strategy

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Introduction

Where are you, and where do you want to be in terms of advancing your organization's safety functioning? Your goals are probably the first thing that comes to mind. But we have learned from working at thousands of client sites around the world that a goal by itself — often a big goal such as zero harm or safety's integration into the actual organization — doesn't define extraordinary safety.

The problem is we keep trying to reach goals in small ways: successions of discrete activities that rarely represent a comprehensive strategy. Safety continues to be dominated by a project-engineering mindset. Stand-alone initiatives are isolated and vulnerable to a lack of leadership and employee engagement. Programs are compounded rather than integrated, creating a safety silo of program activities, one piled on top of the other, and all separate from the organization mainstream. This puts a lid on safety progress and thinking. Safety becomes confined in the organization; its value limited.

The result of this dynamic was summarized at the beginning of 2012 by ASSE President Terrie Norris, who declared, "This nation's efforts to protect workers is stalled."

It is time to challenge safety's conventional wisdom and methods. Systems or mechanisms that reduce or remove exposure to hazards in the workplace are of course essential, but they will not provide you with a comprehensive understanding of the gap between where your organization is regarding safety, and where you want it to be. Safety programs or campaigns with start dates and deadlines will not give you what Zero Index organizations thrive on: the ability to embrace a big picture, a holistic view of where the organization is and where it desires to be.

The Need for Strategy

For this you need a detailed, granular strategy. One that is based on your understanding of the six stages of maturity in organizational safety and the ten safety disciplines, all captured in the Zero Index model. The strategy includes measuring these organizational elements and applying this broad model for higher levels of performance.

Recent challenges and developments underscore the need to stop using a piecemeal strategy toward safety and replace it with a larger, more holistic strategic framework.

Life-altering injuries and fatalities in the U.S. have reached a plateau, as ASSE President Terrie Norris described in her New Year's call for change. Confusion exists among some organizational leaders regarding process safety versus personal safety. Risk must be understood in terms of risk management, safety management, operational integrity and human performance. A safety strategy taxonomy needs to incorporate systems thinking, the safety expertise of operations leaders, and improved incident investigation and root cause analysis.

What is a taxonomy? It is a classification system that creates order and organized structure. It provides a clear sense of direction, and clarity on where you are and where you want to go. It describes what organizations are *not* doing today and articulates where safety is going in the coming years. It is systematic, rather than safety's traditional programmatic approach. It balances short-term and long-term priorities. A taxonomy allows you to benchmark among peers using a common framework and language for performance excellence, and allows you to compare different plants, assets and sites.

BST's Zero Index taxonomy takes into account six stages of maturity in organizational safety performance, from "Safety is a burden" to "Safety is who we are." The taxonomy further defines ten disciplines that shape and drive performance and makes clear the discernable stages of progression within each of these disciplines. Change management principles essential to safety strategy are defined as well.

Safety as Strategy

Conventional safety thinking has focused largely on what we call safety systems—mechanisms that directly seek to reduce or remove exposure to hazards in the workplace. Supply the right systems, the thinking goes, and results will follow. Studies and experience, however, have shown this vision to be flawed; for example, different sites with practically identical safety systems are known to report very different incident frequency rates, even when weighted for technology and workforces.

What we call Zero Index organizations are those organizations distinguished by their ability to take a big picture view of how safety performance occurs. They approach "zero injuries" through observable – and repeatable practices against which others can benchmark. Safety is not a program, but an integral business function that is influenced by, and in turn influences, operational execution. Zero Index performance is:

- **Comprehensive:** Safety activities are guided by a detailed, granular strategy developed from a comprehensive understanding of the gap between where the organization is and where it desires to be.
- **Anticipatory:** Safety performance is driven by a sophisticated set of metrics that detect changes in exposure before they create events.

- **Externally and internally focused:** The organization adapts to changes that influence exposure within and outside the organization.
- **Integrated:** Safety activities are coordinated across functions; they complement other business systems and processes and show a high degree of skill and sophistication.
- **Risk based versus outcome based:** The measure of success (and the trigger for action) is exposure to injuries, not the occurrence of injuries themselves.

Achieving this level of performance is not easy. Nobody starts out as a Zero Index organization. As with all human endeavors, excellence in safety is achieved in stages. The Zero Index model encompasses 10 practices, or disciplines that define safety performance:

- **Vision** – How the organization articulates or defines its goals with respect to safety
- **Engagement** – How the organization values people and relationships.
- **Exposure** – How the organization thinks about injury causation
- **Structure** – The formal structure that supports safety decision making, accountability, and action
- **Scorecard** – How the organization seeks and uses information about safety.
- **Expertise** – The position, function, and contribution of the safety professional.
- **Safety-Enabling Systems** – The specific mechanisms used to manage and improve safety.
- **Leadership** – How leadership is developed and deployed in safety.
- **Culture** – The values, beliefs, and assumptions that influence what people do and the way they do it.
- **Sustaining Systems** – The organizational antecedents and consequences that support effective safety management, leadership, and performance.

Six Stages of Maturity

Performance of the ten disciplines can be roughly grouped into low, average, and high levels, depending on the sophistication and fluency with which the organization applies the disciplines. We refer to these low, medium, and high levels as compliance-driven, goals-driven, and values-driven, each of which has two stages. Together they make up a developmental continuum of the six stages of safety functioning:

1. ***Safety is a burden:*** imposed by outside bodies, with results largely out of our control.
2. ***Safety is a necessity:*** must be managed, do so minimally because we must.

3. ***Safety is a priority:*** safety is valued but the approach is large reactive.
4. ***Safety is a goal:*** safety is goal-driven.
5. ***Safety is a value:*** safety has intrinsic worth and is pursued for its own sake.
6. ***Safety is who we are:*** safety is internalized as a value at all levels of an organization.

How mature is your safety performance effort?

Stage 1: Safety Is a Burden

Across the broad swath of U.S. companies large and small, many feel compelled to comply with OSHA at a minimal expense. At this first stage, it's common to hear, "accident happen," and "safety is management's job." Many foundational elements are missing, such as having a safety professional on staff, because they are not seen as necessities. Overall, there is a lack of ownership in safety by both leadership and employees. No one wants to take ownership of a "burden."

Stage 1 benchmarks: Negative mindset: "Injuries are the cost of doing business." No formal attempt is made to control exposures. Gross or repeat regulatory violations are common.

Stage 2: Safety Is a Necessity

At the next stage, safety is viewed as something of a necessary evil that must be managed, controlled, or contained. That's why safety activities tend to be contained in a silo. Basic elements of safety functioning are not yet fully formed. Engagement is minimal and pushed on people. People do things because they have to, not because they want to.

Stage 2 benchmarks: Passive mindset: "Injuries are just part of the job; they just seem to happen." Safety investments are made to avoid regulatory penalties, not prevent injuries.

Stage 3: Safety Is a Priority

In organizations where safety is held as a priority, it's believed safety does have some intrinsic value beyond being a mandate. So you find safety initiatives, campaigns, safety-enabling systems, professionals on staff, and evaluation and measurement. Many stage-three organizations use traditional OSHA injury and illness recordkeeping to track safety as a priority, but this is like driving looking into the rear-view mirror to see what has already happened. OSHA rates do not explain why events occurred, nor are they predictive of future performance.

Stage 3 benchmarks: The Working Interface where people, systems, processes and technology create risk exposures is not understood. Instead, the focus is mostly on employee behaviors as the cause of incidents. Training is to correct behaviors and antecedents (signs, posters) are to motivate proper behaviors.

Stage 4: Safety Is a Goal

In many organizations safety performance centers around goals. Stage four organizations realize priorities come and go, but safety has more enduring benefits. So safety is formally included as part of the oversight of senior leaders.

Stage 4 benchmarks: The understanding of the roles of behaviors and conditions in causation is more advanced. Conditions catch the eye equal to or more than behaviors. Quality PPE and equipment is a focus. Circumstances surrounding at-risk behavior are not ignored but rather evaluated. Blame the workers is out. Incident investigations tend to be based on the severity of injury.

Stage 5: Safety Is a Value

A small percentage of organizations function at the highest levels of safety performance. This calls for safety to be internalized to the point that it becomes “invisible;” indistinguishable from the overall functioning of the business. At the same time, safety is accepted as part of the organization’s “identity.” The focus is on exposure reduction and integration. The role of safety professionals, governance, safety-enabling systems and evaluation and metrics all function at high levels. Leaders are fluent in safety as a strategy and they grasp safety’s place in the wide fabric of the organization.

The fifth and sixth stages in the evolving maturity of safety functioning are separated by an organization’s reach and grasp. Fifth-stage organizations aspire to embed safety as part of its identity. The essentials to do so are in place, or are being put in place: worker wellbeing and health are recognized as having intrinsic value, and safety-related decisions, structure, and activities are oriented toward the pursuit of safety beyond compliance.

Stage 5 benchmarks: Exposure causation takes into account multiple influences. Data from behavior-based systems are used with assessments of organizational systems and processes as they affect exposures. Incident investigations have more depth; the severity potential of an event is studied, regardless of the actual severity.

Stage 6: Safety Is Who We Are

At the sixth stage, the highest level, safety’s internalization has been accomplished. It is visibly part of the identity of employees, leadership, the entire organization. The organization is highly tuned to even subtle changes in risk exposure, and employees take the initiative to partner across boundaries to eliminate exposure as if safety is part of their DNA.

Stage 6 benchmarks: The variation in severity potential represented by different types of exposures is understood. Business decisions are weighed against the impact on exposures. Organizations consult employees in the design of new processes, systems and equipment.

These six stages of functioning provide a framework for understanding safety performance beyond “high” and “low.” The Zero Index model allows you to see how the stages differ from each other, and allows you to benchmark and establish your current place on the maturity continuum.

Now comes the hard part: getting to where you want to be. To move forward, you need more than a framework that catalogs organizational traits. Our focus is now on execution and putting safety in motion. This requires the ten disciplines that drive safety functioning and determine an organization’s stage of performance. These disciplines are progressive, just as the stages of functioning maturing are progressive.

Assessing Where You Are

Traditional safety assessments tend to be narrow in scope, focusing only on hardware safety systems or “soft” culture issues. Many lack depth; they rely on old generalizations and assumptions about a wide range of factors rather than drilling down to granular specifics as we have presented here. You do not want a check-the-box exercise that will only produce quick, shallow answers to satisfy organizational demands.

An assessment should guide your safety strategy through the step-changes required to move you from where you are to where you want to be. The Zero Index model guides companies through their safety maturation by identifying where they are at in the various stages of safety functioning, and then defining the strategy forward.

An assessment of this depth and scope relies on experience and judgment. You are evaluating the current “as is” state of your organization regarding safety; comparing that with employee and manager perceptions about safety; and then combining the two to define a set of anchor points.

The assessment cannot be rushed. It requires sufficient time to engage employees at all levels and to collect data necessary for developing a comprehensive profile. Assessment methodology involves interviews with employees, technicians, and supervisors, as well as managers; questionnaires; document reviews; and site inspections.

Once you have gathered the data, you rate each of the ten disciplines on a continuum. Create a matrix. On the left side list the ten disciplines — foundational ones first (vision, etc.), followed by the safety disciplines and the organizational disciplines. Across the top of the matrix, from left to right, list the six stages of maturity, from safety is a burden to safety is who we are.

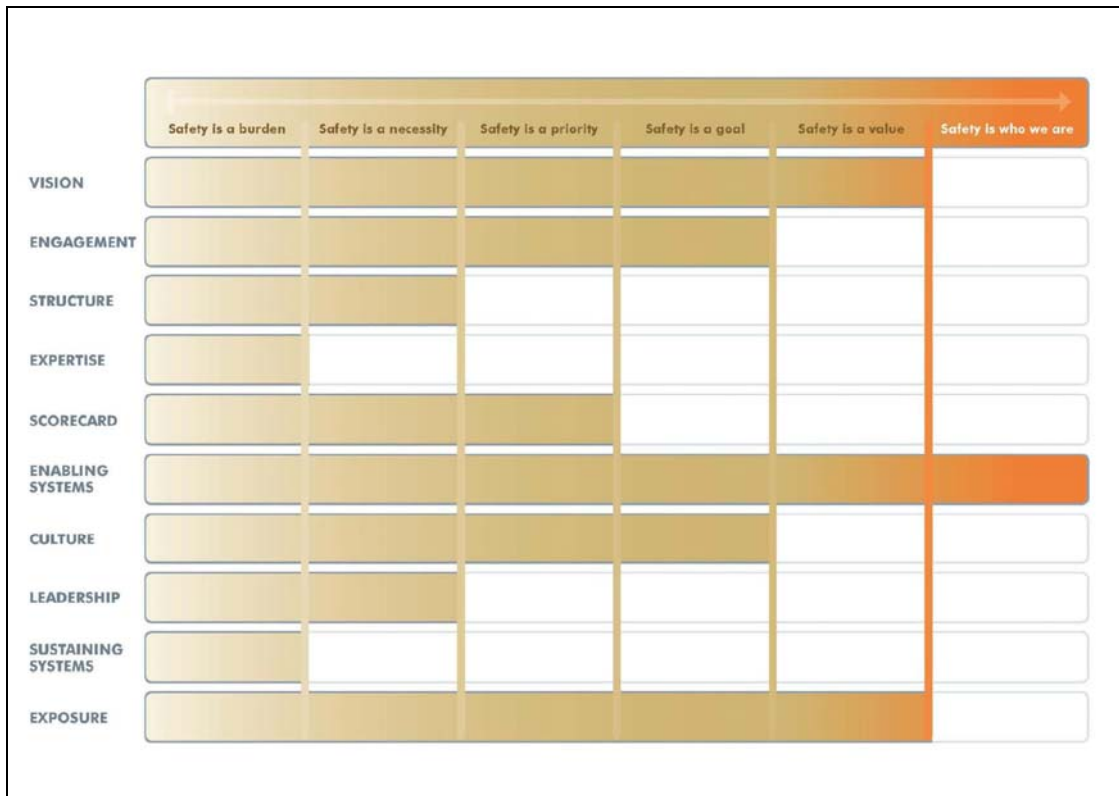


Exhibit 1. Scale of Zero Index disciplines

Determine and plug into the matrix your current level of functioning for each discipline. For vision the descriptor could be “Proactive.” Proactive vision on the matrix is listed under a stage-four organization, characterized overall by “Safety is a goal.” For the discipline of leadership, perhaps your assessment is that it is currently “emergent.” That is characteristic of a stage-three company, where “Safety is a priority.”

Step back from the matrix and you see your safety functioning is further along in terms of vision, with leadership lagging a stage behind. Define what actions are required to move leadership up a notch, so to speak. Then use a defined change execution framework to accomplish the determined actions.

Each of the disciplines has six attributes, from lowest to highest functioning levels. Assess each discipline and determine the level it is at. Now you possess a holistic overview or profile of your organization’s levels of safety functioning. You can see “leading” and “lagging” disciplines, and where interventions are needed to put safety in motion to move ahead. You are working with what many safety leaders wish they had: a comprehensive and granular understanding of how your safety efforts are currently functioning, according to specific operational definitions. Any blind spots have been eliminated. You have a unique map to begin plotting your safety strategy.