



WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY

ENGAGING GEARS TO SUPPORT SAFETY CULTURE, CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT



Engaging Gears to Support Safety Culture, Continuous Improvement

Most occupational health and safety professionals strive for continuous improvement in their own organizations and on behalf of their clients. The driving force is their commitment to a workplace that does no harm.

Practically speaking, continuous improvement is a logical response to the shifting regulatory environment and persistent management pressure to justify any investment in protective measures. One advantage for continuous improvement advocates is that safety is gaining favor as a core business principle (i.e., a “safety culture”) that can be used as a competitive differentiator. There are also strong incentives to utilize more effective tools and equipment, work processes, and training and management practices.

However, companies that successfully sustain a safety culture over time are relatively difficult to find. In many cases, graphs depicting incidents, lost-time rates and other metrics reveal a series of peaks and valleys rather than continuous improvement. Sometimes organizations avoid the valleys but hit a performance plateau and doubt whether it will be possible to achieve further improvement.

At larger organizations, there is the added challenge of maintaining consistency across multiple divisions, departments and/or locations. In such cases, a small percentage of underperformers, or worse, a single catastrophic incident, can eclipse significant continuous improvement and damage a company’s reputation.

Many of the factors that make continuous improvement difficult to achieve fall under the category of “human limitations.”

These include:

- knowledge gaps;
- failure to identify a hazard or employ a proper procedure;
- managerial directives that conflict with safety goals;
- lack of time to focus on key initiatives.

Conversely, nearly all top-performing continuous quality efforts overcome human limitations by leveraging technology and pursuing a system-based approach to safety and health management.



Five Gears Driving Improvements

There are five key areas in which safety improves or breaks down. Similar to automotive gears, these areas must be inter-connected and fully engaged to achieve a consistent upward progression toward peak performance.

The first two gears are relatively fundamental: worksite conditions and employee behaviors. For example, when regulations mandate certain conditions, most worksite programs accelerate well beyond mere compliance. Still, there are limits to the quality and consistency of performance that can be achieved by focusing on these areas alone, just as there are limits to how fast a car can go if it is kept in first or second gear.

The third gear, processes, provides structure and guidance for the workforce while simultaneously solidifying how professionals track and measure safety and health outcomes. The fourth gear is a management system that defines values, goals and strategies to better align diverse processes and functions while also providing benchmarks to gauge progress and guide corrections.

The fifth gear — safety culture — is both the sum of the first four and a single powerful force that drives sustained improvement.

Building a Safety Culture

Top-performing companies that take a proactive approach to strengthening their safety culture define exactly what “stronger” means to them before they develop methods to assess specific

strengths and limitations and design implementation strategies to sustain results. Orientation and training, setting and enforcing rigorous safety standards, and corporate messaging are examples of essential culture-building activities.

In an organization with highly evolved processes and systems in which culture permeates every activity, the payoff can be profound:

- Worksite safety improves because everyone helps identify potential areas for improvement.
- Workers engage in safety-conscious behavior every time, not just when there is an incentive or threat of punishment.
- Safety processes continuously improve because there is a higher level of participation.
- Safety management systems become more effective because different functions and departments are united behind system values and goals.

As continuous improvement depends on synchronous operation of all five gears, it also relies on the quality, quantity and frequency of data collectively produced by the “machine.” Experience shows opportunities for improvement are limited when data come only from traditional lagging indicators such as total recordable incident rates or annual number of workers’ compensation claims. Such indicators are valuable, but they tend to drive improvements too late — after the damage is done. By themselves, they can also be misleading because they describe what happened, not what is happening now.

The most effective safety management systems are engineered to collect and respond to leading indicators. For instance, a company might create a process to perform weekly observations and track leading indicators such as number of unsafe behaviors observed or use a scorecard to assess a broader range of activities. When combined with other processes such as workforce surveys and near-miss reporting, the employer





obtains a steady stream of reliable, timely information that can be used to identify and address potential problems. Correlating leading indicators with lagging indicators over time makes them even more valuable when allocating preventive resources.

The Missing Link

Success also depends on creating a culture that supports early reporting. This may start with near misses and evolve to include other types of observations from all members of the workforce.

More observers generally equates to better performance because companies acquire ongoing information to drive safety processes. For instance, causal analysis techniques can be applied to similar, negative observations to identify contributing factors and corrective actions needed to address system and process deficiencies before a loss occurs. Focused inspections also may be used to measure culture change.

Companies using this model frequently achieve performance that is the envy of their peers. Yet even they can hit safety performance plateaus. The obstacle preventing further improvement on a path toward zero is usually the same one that prevents companies from implementing this model at all: resources.

The real game-changer here is investment in technology. Integrated, cross-functional, web-based management systems have been valuable business tools for at least a decade, but it's only been in the past couple of years that UL's workplace health and safety business and other pioneers have created comprehensive systems

designed specifically for occupational health and safety-related functions such as training and case management.

Features include intuitive dashboards modeled after online social media networks that allow employees, even anonymously, to report unsafe conditions and near-miss incidents in just a few keystrokes. These systems also automate many time-consuming tasks and leverage the "beyond human" capacity of computers to collect, sort and organize data without adding staff.

Early adopters of cutting-edge safety management technology are positioned to reap enormous benefits. However, it is important to emphasize that technology alone is not a "magic bullet." Whether advising your own employer or a client company on technological applications, here are a few key questions to ask:

How aggressive is the organization's approach to safety and risk management? A strong commitment is necessary for long-term results.

Is the organization committed to continuous improvement? Companies that see safety as a cost center and do the minimum to comply experience a fraction of the benefits that technology can provide.

What will be measured and how? Robust analyses require significant human involvement, from generating initial data (e.g., input from observations, completing surveys, etc.) to setting clear goals and having a strategic plan to using the data to achieve meaningful results.

Are safety leaders ready to lead the

charge? Change requires leadership, and even in optimal scenarios, new technology represents significant changes.

What are the technical barriers to implementation? It's important to consider how a safety management system will integrate with other technology in use.

Finally, it can also be quite valuable to get an outside perspective. Whether your organization is committed to implementing a comprehensive, web-based safety management system or just beginning to explore what is available, it is advisable to work with professionals who have expertise in safety in your specific industry, not just in the technology.

AUTHOR

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