Safety's Core Disciplines

It's easy to look back after an accident and find something (or someone) to blame. What's harder is to look closer at why these things happened; why, for instance, an operator didn't alert co-workers to a hazard, or why critical paper work wasn't in order, or why necessary PPE was unavailable.

As safety leaders, our job is to provide an environment that supports and drives optimal safety functioning.

Oftentimes, this means looking beyond the obvious answers (better systems, more training) and helping others see the bigger picture. The reality is that employees run into processes that reinforce certain ways of doing things and discourage others. Shared norms of behavior dictate how (or whether) safety requirements are met.

Whether you think you can or think you can't – you are right.

Henry Ford

Perceived leadership priorities and values influence what gets the attention in day-to-day operations.

In other words, despite our good intentions, safety outcomes are largely shaped by the steady stream; of organizational decisions and actions that define how we work.

Safety's Core Disciplines

Advancing the safety excellence of an organization is a little like improving the performance of an elite athlete. It takes many disciplines working in concert to achieve optimal performance. In safety, that means that in addition to high-quality safety systems, governance, employee engagement, and other tools, the organization must also develop a solid set of core disciplines to support them. These disciplines we call culture, leadership and sustaining systems.

Culture –

In the simplest terms, the discipline of culture has to do developing the common value for safety. It answers the question: What really matters to us? Left to develop on their own, many cultures can skew toward rewarding risk taking, giving hero status to people who just get the job done. As organizations develop, they may begin to show an appreciation of safety's business benefits. Ultimately, if leaders persist, a culture can come to value safety for its own sake, creating a place where people at all levels refuse to compromise safety for any reason.

Leadership –

Leaders have tremendous influence. Yet few organizations consider the true charter or scope of leadership (it's not just dictating objectives from the top of the organization). As a discipline, leadership has to do with how we develop and deploy safety leaders. At the rudimentary level, safety may be dismissed as something not worth leadership attention at all. Many organizations are more in the middle range of performance, valuing safety leadership but really only seeing it practiced by a handful of individuals. At the highest levels, safety leadership is something expected—and developed—in people at every level.

It only takes one mistake for a tragedy to occur.

Sustaining Systems –

Hiring and training functions, performance management, succession planning, and other business systems all tell people what really matters. The sustaining systems discipline is about aligning these processes with safety. At the lowest levels, these systems tend to support production or profitability at any cost. In the middle, safety may emerge as a distinct goal but systems may reward outputs (injury numbers) rather than inputs (exposure reduction activities).

At the highest levels, sustaining systems are aligned to support our highest goals and values for safety. Individually and in combination, these disciplines drive all activities related to safety performance improvement and directly influence the probability that those activities will be successful. These disciplines can best be described as the core of the organization. Through them, organizations create, strengthen, and support performance.

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