

## business issues

# THE FUTURE OF SAFETY EXCELLENCE

BY TERRY L. MATHIS

A truly excellent safety plan must not be merely reactionary but also anticipatory.

**WHAT IS REQUIRED** to be good at safety evolves over time, but what it takes to be truly excellent at safety is a more dynamic, moving target.

The accepted way to hit a moving target is to anticipate its path and aim in front of its current position. This is called leading the target. If we are to hit this moving target of future safety excellence, we must lead it. While anticipating the future is a pursuit with many variables, analyzing current trends at least suggests where the future might lead and gives us indicators of potential paths. Analyzing these trends in organizations with past success at safety excellence is even more likely to produce reliable results. It was such an analysis that prompted a series of articles culminating in the recent book *Forecasting Tomorrow: The Future of Safety Excellence*. In the book, we discuss the seven most common trends.

**Trend 1: Excellence will be reframed.** Savvy leaders are realizing that defining safety in terms of lagging indicators, especially “zero accidents,” does not get workers engaged. In fact, once you set a goal of zero, any other number is a demotivating indicator of failure. This does not mean goals go away; it just means they won’t necessarily get publicized as the vision of excellence. New metrics that describe the strategy and methodology will become the prescriptive process indica-

tors for leaders, and common practice metrics will become the guiding and reinforcing metrics for workers. Both groups will realize the temporary lack of accidents is not the real measure of excellence and will strive to learn what produced lower accident rates and how to repeat the results year to year. With this will come the realization that even excellent results can still be improved upon, yielding true, continuous improvement.

**Trend 2: From programs to strategy.** Those with the most excellent results are becoming more strategic and less programmatic in their approach to safety. This does not mean safety programs will go away, but it does mean the programs will have to be properly fit within the strategic framework. Strategy will align thinking and decision-making in the field and help leaders better select and deselect the programs they use. The heritage safety programs that

have sapped resources without producing results will either be revised or dropped. All programs and efforts will be aimed at strategic goals, and the strategy will become the battle plan to win the war against accidental injury.

**Trend 3: Leaders will actually lead safety.** As safety becomes more strategic, safety leadership will become less delegated. Organizational leaders will still need to delegate the busy work of safety but will not delegate the development of the strategy or the highest levels of safety leadership. Safety strategies delegated to safety professionals almost always conflict and compete with business strategies, and safety strategies almost always lose. Leaders will take responsibility for setting the strategic direction of safety efforts and ensuring they can peacefully coexist with the business strategy. Organizational leaders will talk the talk of safety and send clear messages about the priority or value of safety as opposed to other priorities.

**Trend 4: Grunt to guardian to guru.** As organizational leaders take the lead in safety, their direct reports and other levels down to first-line supervisors will follow the lead. Safety professionals will be pushed out of the daily grunt work of safety and become true safety managers. They will assist and

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▲ Going a certain amount of time without an accident is only part of the overall safety picture.

direct line managers and supervisors in the daily safety work and become the guardians of safety, ensuring it is successful. As safety becomes a line responsibility, line people will become more and more competent at managing it. At this point, the safety professional will need to become a resource and subject-matter expert advising rather than directing safety efforts. Such safety gurus have already emerged in some organizations that lead in safety excellence.

**Trend 5: New kind of safety consultant.** As organizational safety excellence changes, so will safety excellence consultants. Safety excellence consulting will no longer be based on the expertise of the consultant but rather on the unique needs of the organization. Consultants will need to be less specialists and more generalists, less scientists and more technologists and corporate problem solvers, less sellers of programs and more developers of strategies and programs to fit those strategies. The new consulting will require more business acumen and basic organizational design expertise. It will happen more in the corporate boardroom and less in the safety office or plant floor. Of course, there will always be a need for basic safety consultants that help organizations get from bad to good, but the consultants helping organizations get from good to great will change significantly.

**Trend 6: Safety programs will change focus.** It was already mentioned that programs will become more fit for pur-

pose within strategic frameworks. Those strategies are already changing views from the worker being a problem to be controlled to the customer whose needs should be met. As this trend progresses, programs will change from a focus on control to a focus on marketing. Safety training will strive for engagement as well as knowledge transfer. Off-the-shelf programs will have a harder time truly meeting workers' needs, creating meaningful engagement and adding value to a strategic direction. Programs will be more often custom-created than universally marketed. The goal of safety programs will evolve from only impacting lagging indicators to truly adding value.

**Trend 7: Safety metrics will focus on value.** As safety programs seek to add value, safety metrics will seek to measure the value added. The initial metrics will be quantity metrics (how much value was added?) but will evolve to quality metrics as well (how effectively and efficiently was value added?). The one-dimensional metrics of lagging indicators will give way to the two-dimensional metrics of leading and lagging indicators. But the evolution will not end there. The correlation and causation relationships between the leading and lagging indicators will begin to emerge as algorithms that develop cause-and-effect analysis and results in a truly three-dimensional model of what it takes to create excellent safety performance—what Deming would have called “profound knowledge” of the safety excellence process.

Although these seven trends are common to most industries, there are many more that are industry-specific and may impact your organization. The goal of this kind of analysis is to help organizations avoid costly ambushes by future-proofing their safety efforts to the greatest extent possible. If your organization is not already on the leading edge of safety excellence, these trends should also suggest other things you could do to add value to your safety efforts. The future almost inevitably holds surprises, and many simply continue on their current path and hope for the best. Those truly seeking safety excellence try to do everything they can to control their own destiny by creating it. The further they can see into the potential future, the more perfectly they can stay in control and not be driven off course by trends that could have been predicted and prepared for. ■

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