

Compromised Values Caused Oil Spill

This was one of the headlines stating the conclusion of a presidential commission investigating the massive spill of 100's of millions of gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. The spill led to the deaths of 11 people and immeasurable environmental damage.

A majority of efforts to achieve a culture of safety excellence fail! Why is failure the norm and not the exception? The fault lies in the flawed strategy used to create a safety culture--Leadership does not align strategy with a core belief in the concept of no incident/no one gets hurt. In this paper, we will introduce you to what we have learned about creating a sustainably safe work place culture.

Did you know a majority of efforts to achieve a high degree of safety excellence fail? Why is failure the norm and not the exception? The fault lies in the strategy used to create safety culture--Leadership does not align strategy with a core belief in the concept of no incident/no one gets hurt. In this essay, we want to explore why this is so and how to avoid this fate. In the process, we will introduce you to what we have learned about creating a sustainably safe work place.

Why Traditional Approaches to Safety Fail

Traditional approaches to safety are behaviorally or rules-based and herein lies the seeds for failure. To appreciate why failure is the norm and not the exception, consider that there are two kinds of change: rule- driven change and value-based change. In the former, the aim is to do more of the same or to do it better (e.g., as in improve compliance with safety rules), while in the latter, the aim is to do something new and to do it well (e.g., to improve commitment to safety values).

In rule-driven change, you are asking people to use the same skill set, the same behaviors, and the same working relationships to achieve the more or higher quality results. In value driven change, you are asking people to learn new skills, engage in new ways of behaving, and practice new ways of working with peers. The bottom line is this: the two types of change require vastly different leadership disciplines.

Let's get back to the dilemma of sustainable safety: Most organizations try to achieve safety through a rules-driven change discipline; however, these processes work for only a short while before the company returns to ineffective pre-safety change levels.. This is because rules-based programs are based on the concept of compliance with an external set of rules. One of the things that happens with such programs is that they t shift the locus of control from the inside (values) to the outside (rules) and they rely on extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation to succeed. We all know however, that people are natural born rule breakers, not because they are evil or undisciplined but because we are always striving to innovate and change..

Values-based cultures, on the other hand, place the locus of control squarely on the shoulders of each person and thus shift the responsibility and accountability for safety from the outside to the inside and the motivation for being safe from the outside to the inside, from *have to* - to *want to*.

How?

To create a sustainable safety culture, you must do exactly the opposite – you must shift the locus of control from the outside to the inside and the source of motivation from extrinsic to intrinsic. Four things must happen to create

- Shared Meanings and Beliefs – The first ingredient to achieve and sustain safety excellence is affirmation of and commitment to a set of shared meanings and beliefs that total safety is an attainable goal. One way companies establish these shared meanings and beliefs is through articulation of a shared set of values.
- Focused Experiences – the organization and its many functions and work groups is like a container. Inside this container, experiences must be created or made possible that enable each employee to identify and eliminate risk.
- Focused Actions – to identify and eliminate risk, each employee must have the tools, the power, and the motivation to work towards such a result. This means that each person’s job must be designed in such a way that she or he is empowered to act to achieve the desired result of TOTAL SAFETY.
- Focused Results – in the process of creating a sustainable safety culture, the place to begin is at the end – with the result of no incident/no one gets hurt.

Figure 1 illustrates these four elements of their relationship. Note that the end result – sustainable safety – is the outcome of a set of cause and effect relationships.

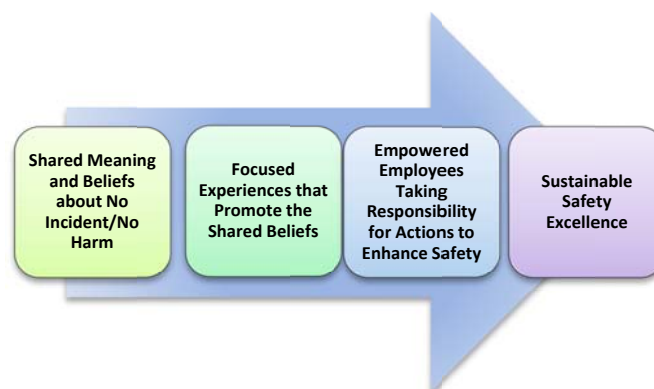


Figure 2 shows you what you are after – the alignment of leadership practice, employee empowerment, and safety systems and processes.



Conclusion

There is a saying in our business - either you are managing your safety culture or it is managing you. You are either moving toward a safe culture or your culture is becoming increasingly unsafe. The truth of the matter is that a culture of safety is never an accident. It is the result of a focused and persistent effort by the leadership of an organization. This is why it is imperative for organizations to commit to the belief of no incident/no one gets hurt and to make sure your organization is totally aligned around this belief.

Somerset Consulting Group delivers organizational success by improving profit, sales, and productivity with our consulting, research and selection tools based on our unique and proprietary understanding of organizational and employee performance and change.