The Consequence Strategy for Managing Safety

By Betty Loafmann

No one wants to see people hurt. No company wants to spend money needlessly on insurance and/or damages caused by accidents. Therefore, every manager and company should have a strategy for managing safety.

By definition a strategy may be simple or complex – a concept confirmed by the business world's widely varying approaches to safety management.

– Betty Loafmann

Traditional management courses teach that to meet any business or safety goal, it is essential to design and implement plans or strategies. Of course, it is useful to establish goals and think through the methods for meeting those goals. However, sometimes those who manage, whether they are traditional managers, safety teams or self-managed work teams, become so involved in the planning that they lose sight of the fact that it is what they do, not what they plan to do, that truly makes the difference. No matter how extensive or how deliberate the plans for safety are, the set of consequences that actually occur will determine what people perceive as the organization's real safety strategy.

Webster's Dictionary defines "strategy" as a "careful plan or method for achieving an end." By definition a strategy may be simple or complex – a concept confirmed by the business world's widely varying approaches to safety management. Webster's definition appears to refer to a conscious, well-thought-out plan, but some companies seem to have two or more incompatible strategies – an indication that the strategies are either unconsciously implemented or, at best, poorly planned.

Safety is something that happens between your ears, not something you hold in your hands.

— Jeff Cooper

Individual elements of different safety approaches may inspire sporadic improvements. However, to create a consistently effective strategy, safety managers must understand fundamental facts about human behavior. The behavioral laws that should be used as the guiding template in the design or any safety initiative are as follows.

ANTECEDENTS PROMPTS OR CUES INFORM PEOPLE ABOUT BEHAVIORS AND RESULTS

For example, instructions tell us how to do something, or a poster may remind us of a desirable behavior or result such as "Safety First." Such antecedents sometimes help to get a behavior started, but they do not permanently change behavior. The implication of this fact is that a safety strategy should include antecedents, but not be limited to them.

PEOPLE RESPOND TO CONSEQUENCES THAT ARE IMMEDIATE AND CERTAIN BUT TEND TO DISCOUNT CONSEQUENCES WHICH THEY PERCEIVE TO BE A FUTURE AND/OR UNCERTAIN

The implication of this fact is that a strategy that places primary consequences in the distant future and makes the consequence dependent on behaviors or circumstances employees feel they do not control will tproduce disappointing results.

POSITIVE REINFORCERS ARE THE ONLY CONSEQUENCES THAT PRODUCE HIGH FREQUENCY LEVELS OF BEHAVIOR AND A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT AND PRIDE IN THOSE BEHAVIORS

Fear and punishment will only lead people to try and find ways to avoid negative consequences. Strategies based on such methods will never maximize desired behaviors. The implication of this fact is that a strategy that increases the use of positive reinforcement has the potential to make significant and permanent change. In contrast, a strategy that tries to manage behavior through increased awareness of danger will be limited in its effectiveness.

BEHAVIOR CHANGE IS ONLY POSSIBLE WHEN EMPLOYEES RECEIVE FREQUENT DATA BASED PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

A safety strategy must include not only a measurement system but also a feedback system that enables people to see the smallest of changes in effort and/or results. A good measurement system also enables the managers of the strategy to identify which parts of the improvement plan are the most successful. The implication of this fact is that safety management requires all levels of an organization to use measures additional to incident rate to evaluate performance progress and the efficiency of each strategy component.

STRAT-E-GY

A CAREFUL PLAN OR METHOD FOR ACHIEVING AN END.

Webster's Dictionary

THE OBJECTIVE OF A SAFETY STRATEGY

When developing a safety strategy, the first step is to determine the overarching objective.

For safety there are two possibilities, but only one viable choice.

1. Accident containment is an approach that focuses on accidents, hazards and unsafe behaviors. The goal is the elimination or containment of problems. Accidents are attacked and reduced by eliminating the acts and objects that put people in danger. Usually, this strategy depends heavily on the use of negative feedback and disciplinary action for people who have accidents or engage in unsafe behaviors.

Value will always be on the top of everyone's list, right along with safety.

— David Neeleman

2. Safety maximization (construction) focuses on positive safety results and levels of safe behaviors which people achieve.

Both focal points serve as indicators that people are proactively managing their safety. The goal is to increase the component causes of safety. This strategy depends strongly on the use of positive feedback and reinforcement for those who make themselves and others safer, thus creating more pride in active safety involvement than in taking risks.

While these two strategies are not totally exclusive, they are incompatible at many points. Accident containment is the most familiar safety objective but also the one that produces limited and irregular success. Because the containment goal is to eliminate what is wrong, people only look for what is wrong. Managers observe and criticize employee work habits, and employees observe and criticize equipment and company procedures. Less animosity exists if the local work team manages safety, but everyone is still trapped by the goals that are expressed by some degree of being less bad or less unsafe.

Ironically, with the containment approach, the trigger for celebration is the end of a string of consecutive days without accidents. In other words, when safety is defined as the number of days without accidents, then the occurrence of an accident defines each new record. This makes for a strange time to celebrate.

Also, when the containment or elimination of accidents is the objective, people go forth with the goal of stopping each other from taking unnecessary risks. Each observer's job, essentially, is to become a nag. Of course, some people try to be pleasant nags, but their topic of conversation remains centered on what someone did wrong or should have done.

> I have no problem with the security...It's smething that must be done for the times in which we live. Safety first.
> — Aaron Brown

This is not to say that it is wrong to correct, but the key question is one of proportion. The goal of containment means that the primary activity is to name problems and correct them. Since most people don't enjoy criticism, they eventually resent the safety initiative and avoid the people who manage it.

Safety maximization and/or construction is not just a phrase or a case of semantics; it is a whole new outlook. To build safety, organizations must find the activities that are desirable and recognize improvements. Building safety requires an organization's safety managers to go beyond stating what they don't want to see and instead to state clearly what they do want to see. Furthermore, looking for what is correct and telling people about it is a much more pleasant task that people are more willing to do, meaning that fewer and fewer positive actions are overlooked or ignored.

Since it is only possible to obtain exemplary results from the positive or constructive safety approach, a brief explanation of that approach follows.

SAFETY STRATEGY TWO-COMPONENT PROCESS

To be successful, a safety strategy should include two components: (1) how to enable people to stay safe by positioning them to succeed, and (2) how to build commitment and optimum safety responses through reinforcement.

The first goal of a good safety strategy is to ensure that people can act safely. Any physical or educational impediments to safe work habits must be addressed. All possible avenues to facilitate working safely should be explored. This strategic phase requires precision, focus and data so that people change only those aspects of their work that make a positive difference.

The second component of a good strategy is a detailed plan for improving and/or

maintaining employee commitment to do the things that will make them safe. Since consequences are the major factors that determine what we do and how willingly we do it, the analysis of and planning for the delivery of positive consequences are core issues in the commitment component. Only when this component is developed and delivered in a manner consistent with the laws of human behavior, can the entire strategy work.

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Building Safety requires an organization's safety managers to go beyond stating what they don't want to see; instead, to state clearly what they DO WANT TO SEE.

Unfortunately, most companies limit this part of the strategy to plans for a monetary reward based on incident rate or number of days without a lost-time accident or disciplinary action. Such structures seldom include plans for ongoing use of recognition or reinforcement. Without plans for the delivery of consequences, coworkers, supervisors, managers and safety technicians will deliver inappropriate consequences to each other for working safety and for taking chances. Without plans for how to reinforce people, everyone accidentally ignores both desired and undesired behaviors. To compound the problem, enthusiasm for production goals often causes consequences to be delivered that make safety appear to be a lower level priority.

The mixed messages cause confusion about how serious the organization is about the stated safety strategy or confirms the belief that safety is only "talk deep." In short, an organization's perceived safety strategy may or may not be intentional, but ultimately, the safety culture that exists is the safety culture created by the organization.

A safety culture is a direct result of each employee's day-to-day experiences. For example, the employee who is criticized for taking too long to set up a ladder properly believes he works for a company that cares more about production than safety. The employee who knows that in the past six months three people were fired, demoted or suspended for motor vehicle accidents, believes that the company's strategy for managing safety is to come down hard on the guy who makes a mistake. Other employees believe that their company's strategy is to talk safety but to act on cost. Such beliefs don't arise from reading documents but from actual experiences such as attend-

> **Deterrence itself is not a preeminent value; the primary values are safety and morality.**
>
> — Herman Kahn

ing safety meetings where safety is pledged as a number one value followed by no response to a valid safety suggestion that would cost the company a mere $600 to implement.

In contrast, the employee who knows that requests for safety modifications on machinery are immediately acted upon believes that

the company does take safety seriously. When an organization's strategies, plans and intentions for safety include plans for reinforcement and correction and when those plans match the real experiences of people, few negative surprises occur. When they don't match, a company can expect nothing but surprises and desired results are not attained.

The safety team that (1) talks about the importance of safety, (2) spends large blocks of time completing job safety analyses, (3) planning how to change things (4) but then ignores people when they change will be surprised to find that nobody thinks there has been significant improvement in the safety strategy and that coworkers' commitment to safety undergoes little to no change. The safety management team may even find that no one uses the job safety analysis tool they worked so hard to create.

On the other hand, a plan to spend a few minutes each day reinforcing people for performing safety-related behaviors could make all the safety team's work well worth the effort.

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[About the Author]

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