

How to Move from Excellent to Extraordinary Safety Performance

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Introduction

Among the companies and institutions we have worked with, many have demonstrated what we would call excellent safety performance. They consistently apply their efforts and sound safety practices to achieve substantial safety outcomes. We have also seen that among these organizations there is a distinct set of “extraordinary” performers; organizations that take their safety performance to a discernibly higher level. These organizations tend not only to surpass the outcomes achieved by their counterparts, they are distinct for another reason; for them safety occupies a wholly different, and some would say unconventional, place in the organizational scheme. They see safety as a performance leader, and actively engage it as such. This paper examines the difference between excellent and extraordinary safety performance, the importance of creating extraordinary safety, the requisite factors for achieving that level of performance, and the implications it has for organizations.

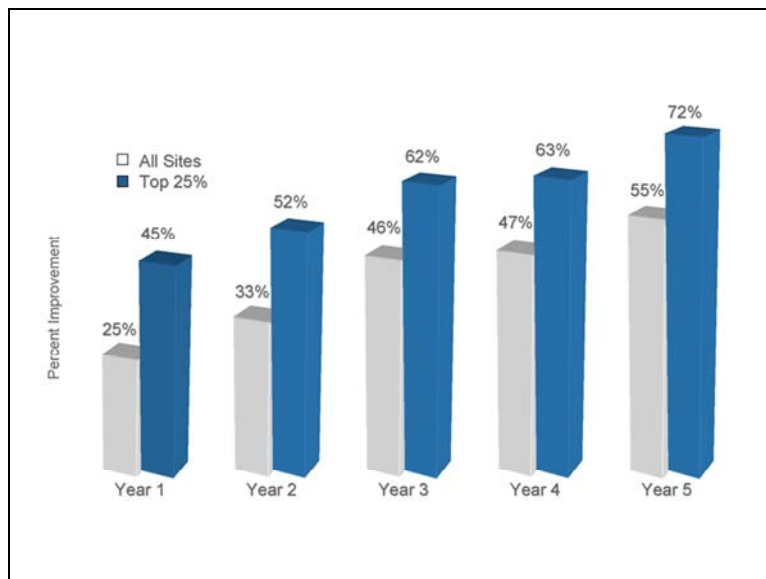


Exhibit 1. Data from a meta-analysis involving 73 organizations showing safety improvement results.

Background

A five-year meta-analysis of 73 long-term clients revealed an interesting trend in improvement in incident rates. While all sites involved in the study showed remarkable improvement each year, the top 25% of these sites showed a yearly incident rate improvement that was significantly higher. This raised a question: what is it about this group that accounts for such a difference in improvement rates? What does the subset have or do that accounts for such accelerated improvement? In other words, “What is the difference behind excellent and extraordinary safety performance?”

Excellent safety performance protects an organization’s employees and assets. *Extraordinary* safety performance uses excellent safety as a *starting point* for high-functioning generally. Extraordinary safety performers tend to sustain a zero-harm workplace culture, effectively prevent work-related fatalities, and leverage safety as a vehicle for creating a high-performance organizational culture. Interestingly, the road from excellent to extraordinary need not be a long one; once they have done the hard work of becoming excellent safety performers, organizations have acquired the requisite raw materials needed to become “extraordinary” performers. What’s needed to make the transition is, first, forming the intent to become extraordinary and, second, developing an understanding of what that means and how to get there.

Why Aim at Extraordinary?

Achieving excellence in safety performance in the first place is not easy. It requires a concerted effort to align safety objectives with organizational resources and will. In our experience, this forms the foundation for extraordinary performance. Both excellent and extraordinary performers share a common starting point; they see good safety as the right thing to do. The question then becomes not so much why should an organization aim for extraordinary safety, but *why not?* Extraordinary performance is an extension of the work already begun, it is the work of optimizing the existing quality and reach of safety performance, and as a result, it is a way of solidifying the place of safety in an organization. It does this in two primary ways: extraordinary safety helps sustain the results of excellent safety performance, and it builds a performance platform that benefits the organization as a whole.

Extraordinary safety helps sustain results over the long term. Consider short-term safe periods. When incident rates drop and an organization enjoys a period of time without injuries, safety in the organization is perceived as good. Safety climate, however, has a volatile nature, easily changed by alternating interest and neglect on the part of leadership or the organization in general. A lack of incidents over a few months may be chance more than the result of planning and effort. It is not atypical for an organization to achieve excellent safety outcomes for a time and then see a rash of incidents. When this occurs, organizational leaders intensify their interest in safety and outcomes once more improve. This dynamic, when graphed, takes on the look of a roller coaster ride. Employees perceive this type of approach to safety as reactive, and the overall impact on the organization is negative.

Extraordinary safety performance also creates the conditions for high performance across the board. The cultural characteristics necessary for extraordinary safety are the same as those needed

for high performance generally; indeed, many of the requisite cultural characteristics are actually not safety specific, for instance leader-member exchange (the relationship between an employee and his or her supervisor), procedural justice (the perception of fairness in decision making), and management credibility (the level to which leaders are perceived to be trustworthy and reliable). Safety provides a neutral starting point for addressing these characteristics, and when done well, extraordinary performers can provide attractive return on investment in productivity, employee morale, reduced absenteeism, and other critical business metrics.

The Elements of Extraordinary Safety

We have seen that organizations that demonstrate extraordinary safety results are defined by several key characteristics. They integrate safety into the infrastructure of the organization (rather than leave it isolated from other systems and efforts). They use systems strategically. They focus on exposure in the Working Interface and use a sound Hierarchy of Controls over hazards. Lastly, they maintain widespread employee engagement at all levels of their organizations.

Integrating Safety

Extraordinary safety performers first see safety as integral to the organization; to them it is something critical to performance generally and its practices are used and developed alongside other business practices. Traditionally, safety was the concern almost exclusively of the safety department. Organizations had difficulty obtaining buy-in for safety programs because they had compartmentalized safety. Production managers and safety managers had their separate goals and these goals were frequently not in alignment. More employees were focused on production than on safety, and the practical consequences of this disparity were played out on the shop floor. Where culture is strongly oriented toward production, and regard for safety is the concern of the safety professional on site, employees often choose to work at risk since they perceive the positive consequences of meeting quotas, making the boss happy, and getting a bonus as more certain than the consequences of raising safety concerns. In such cases, workers may try to repair energized equipment to save time, or find at-risk shortcuts to safe work procedures.

Integrating safety takes alignment in the organization from the top down. The safety leader will know that safety has become an integral part of the organization when safety becomes a criterion for consideration in all business-critical decisions, i.e. how will this affect safety? directly or indirectly? positively or negatively? and how will this affect employee perceptions around safety?

Strategic Use of Systems

In addition to being integral to the organization, extraordinary safety performers are also strategic; they develop a well-thought-out plan that shapes, rather than reacts to, safety outcomes. This strategic safety is strongly related to the judicious use of systems. The following model shows the inter-relations of safety-related organizational systems. (See Exhibit 2)

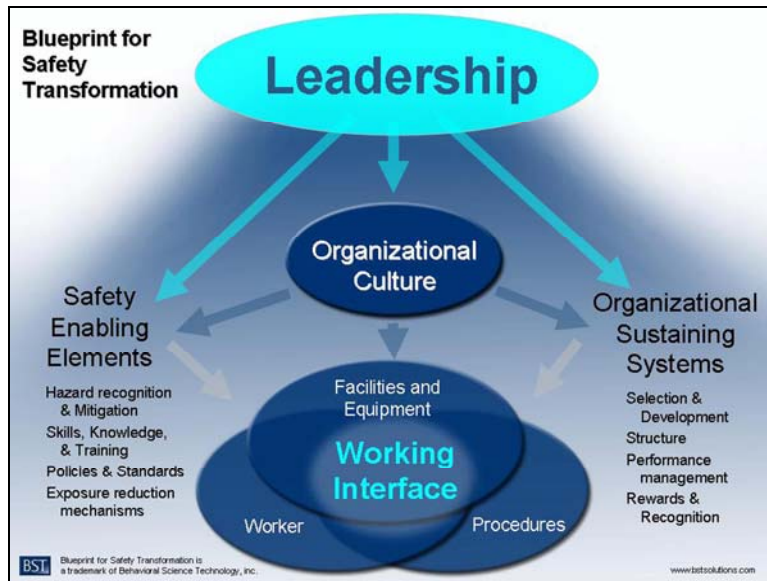


Exhibit 2: This model shows the dynamics of systems' influences within an organization.

One of the objections we hear to moving toward extraordinary safety is that it will only add to existing work. These objections have a point; many organizations struggle with additional programs and systems, however these are oftentimes piled on in reaction to a serious injury event. With so many regulations and programs already in the mix for safety leaders, this tactic is often counterproductive. What's often needed is not something more, but to use better what we have. Accordingly, extraordinary safety performance does not necessarily mean adding efforts or systems; most organizations have adequate systems and programs already. What it does mean, however, is developing a comprehensive understanding of how the systems relate to one another and how the organization can best align them, that is, a strategic view of how to use these systems.

Fundamentally, safety performance consists of safety enabling systems (hazard recognition, training, policies, etc.). These systems enable safe work to occur and for the organization to remove barriers to safe work. As essential as these systems are, however, they are not by themselves sufficient for safety functioning. To be strategic, it is essential that we grasp the "whole picture" of how safety performance is created. Safety enabling systems work by addressing hazards in the Working Interface – the place where what people do interacts with the technology, policies, and procedures of the workplace. Hazards exist in this configuration and ultimately, safety performance depends on our ability to reduce the hazards here.

The blueprint in Exhibit 2 outlines the whole picture of systems and factors that influence safety enabling systems and their effectiveness as reducing hazards in the Working Interface. Organizational sustaining systems (management systems, personnel selection and development, the organization's structure, etc.) dictate in large part the effectiveness of safety enabling systems. For instance, regardless of good intentions, hazard reduction will be difficult or impossible if the general work order system is slow or dysfunctional. In addition to sustaining systems, culture (the

“how we do things here”) and leadership (specifically in safety-related decisions, and the behaviors and directions that shape the culture) strongly influence how well we are able to achieve desired safety performance. Leadership plays a particularly important role. Leaders influence all of these systems, either directly or indirectly, and where leaders recognize the role and purpose of each system, they gain a lever for moving the organization in the desired direction.

Organizational culture (the shared values and beliefs that drive behavior) and safety climate (the prevailing influences on a particular area of functioning) are of particular importance to safety functioning. While more has been written elsewhere, it is sufficient here to outline the critical characteristics shown to be predictive of safety outcomes and which tend to be strong in extraordinary safety performers:

- *Procedural Justice* – The extent to which the individual worker perceives fairness in the supervisor’s decision-making process.
- *Leader-Member Exchange* – The relationship the employee has with his or her supervisor. In particular, this scale measures the employee’s level of confidence that his supervisor will go to bat for him and look out for his interests.
- *Management Credibility* – A perception of the employee that what management says is consistent with what management does.
- *Perceived Organizational Support* – The perception of the employee that the organization cares about him, values him, and supports him.
- *Workgroup Relations* – The perception they employee has of his relationship with co-workers. How well do they get along? To what degree do they treat each other with respect, listen to each other’s ideas, help one another out, and follow through on commitments made?
- *Teamwork* – The extent to which the employee perceives that working with team members is an effective way to get things done.
- *Safety Climate* – The safety climate scale measures the extent to which the employee perceives the organization has a value for safety performance improvement.
- *Upward Communication* – The extent to which communication about safety flows freely upward through the organization.
- *Approaching Others* – The extent to which employees feel free to speak to one another about safety concerns.

The Role of Leadership

Extraordinary safety performers also rely on leadership. In addition to setting the direction of the organization in terms of making safety integral and strategic, leaders influence the cultural dimensions of a high-performing organization through their leadership style and the practices they employ in their interactions and communications with and to the workforce. Leadership style predicts the effectiveness of leadership practices at impacting organizational development and performance. A leader can develop elements of style that will enhance the power of his or her best practices. Are leaders “transactional” in their relationships with employees (that is, do they see performance as an exchange)? Or are they “transformational” in those relationships, (that is, do they see performance as commanding a shared vision, and a chance to appeal to a drive for achievement with their team)?

The leader's practices also influence organizational culture. This means leaders exercise powerful impact on the culture by *what* they do, and more importantly, by *how* they do it—as well as by what they choose not to do. Thus, by learning to be deliberate about their practices, they can control their impact and aim it at cultural issues that are critical to their objectives. A leader's practices are directly under the leader's control and provide a readily available, powerful leverage point for the leader.

We've seen seven leadership practices that recur among leaders successful in developing extraordinary safety performance. These practices directly correlate to improved organizational functioning and can transform an organization's culture to be supportive of safety.

- *Visionary* – Painting a compelling picture of the desired future; challenging and inspiring people around the vision; promoting the organization's vision through word and action; and being creative and innovative in pursuing the vision
- *Credibility* – Being perceived as honest and reliable, characterized by behaviors such as admitting mistakes, treating others with respect and dignity, giving honest information about performance even when it is constructive or unwelcome, following through on commitments, demonstrating actions consistent with words, and being willing to make difficult or unpopular decisions
- *Action Oriented* – Being performance oriented; having a personal sense of urgency; focusing on the most important priorities; doing what it takes to make initiatives successful; and being proactive rather than reactive in dealing with issues
- *Communication* – Actively keeping all people informed about relevant background information and the big picture as well as the detail. Creating an atmosphere in which communication is constructive and encouraged
- *Collaboration* – Promoting cooperation and collaboration within the organization; asking for and encouraging input from people on issues that will affect them; gaining commitment from others before implementing changes; and supporting decisions that others make on their own
- *Feedback & Recognition* – Giving positive feedback for good performance and publicly recognizing contributions of others; finding ways to celebrate accomplishments
- *Accountability* – Requiring people to meet their commitments; setting clear responsibilities; regularly reviewing performance indicators with reports; and fostering a sense that people are responsible for the performance of their groups

A critical area for leaders to focus these best practices on is the Working Interface. Ultimately, leaders need to eliminate or mitigate exposure there, especially when the workers are not able to do it for themselves.

Focus on Exposure

Extraordinary safety performers are also proactive; they focus their efforts on identifying, understanding, and removing exposures ahead of incidents. This focus creates a subtle but important shift in thinking; “Will I get injured here?” becomes “What is my exposure here?” Exposures lead to injuries, and workers face exposures in three forms of control that can be described as non-enabled (or impossible to eliminate or control), difficult (within my power but requiring extra effort), and enabled (within my control to eliminate or control). A warehouse staircase lacking a handrail presents workers with an exposure that is non-enabled every time they need to ascend or descend. It's simply not safe to climb up or down without the railing. We hear

of workers using chairs or a stack of buckets to step on to reach for an overhead valve or switch or to store supplies on a high shelf. They could use a ladder, but it's not close by and sometimes not even in the same building. They opt to take the risk because the exposure is difficult for them to navigate safely. An instance of an enabled exposure is moving a box. It can be done safely simply by using good body positioning and ergonomic technique. Since the ideal situation is to have all work behaviors enabled for safety, the organization needs to recognize what risks exist and develop a system for controlling them.

The Hierarchy of Controls

One particularly crucial safety enabling system that pertains to exposures and that enables extraordinary safety performers actively and continually to reduce risk and hazards is the Hierarchy of Controls. The natures of risks vary widely. Some are frequent, but not grave. These often include many ergonomic risks. At the other end of the risk spectrum are the low-frequency/high-severity risks. Tasks involving worker interaction with high-voltage energized equipment, toxic chemicals, or highly volatile and explosive materials would fall into this category. Whereas an incident in the high-frequency/low-severity class of risk may result in a strain or inflammation, incidents in the low-frequency/high-severity class of risk cause life-changing injuries or even death.

When hazards are identified by design risk assessments, incident investigations, or any other means, they must be controlled. It is the responsibility of leaders at every level to ensure that each identified hazard is controlled in some way. The logic of applying controls in the most effective manners is known as the Hierarchy of Controls. This sub-process entails reducing exposure by using the control strategy as close to the top of the hierarchy as possible and building in as much redundancy as the frequency and severity potential warrant by adding additional lower levels of control as needed:

- *Elimination: Eliminating the hazard at its source.*
- *Substitution: Substituting a safe alternate method or material.*
- *Engineering: installing guards or interlocks on machinery*
- *Administration: Implementing safety policies and procedures*
- *Personal: Using protective equipment, watching out for coworkers.*

After applying controls, it is essential that the organization collect data around them to verify their efficacy and that the Working Interface is now safe. All levels in the organization have to be actively involved in applying and verifying the Hierarchy of Controls. This leads us to the final element that extraordinary safety performers use.

Employee Engagement at All Levels

Finally, as safety interventions roll out, extraordinary performers generate appropriate and strong engagement at every level. Leaders set the tone for the entire effort through their practices, including communications, feedback and recognition, and accountability. Supervisors represent the intent of the organization to the workforce and have an immediate impact on the ease (or difficulty) of many, if not most, safety activities. The front-line level is at the heart of the Working Interface and is poised to identify and collect data on exposures occurring there.

Moving Toward Extraordinary Performance

The elements of extraordinary safety performance – integration, strategy, leadership, a focus on exposure and removing hazards, and engagement – are the characteristics that in our experience define and create extraordinary safety performance. Ultimately, making the transition from excellent to extraordinary begins with leadership. Leaders determine the way in which safety is seen in an organization and creating a strategic safety focus. The elements outlined in this article form a guide that helps leaders and their teams establish or strengthen key organizational elements and build on their existing success.

Of the many benefits to achieving extraordinary safety performance, one of the most rewarding is that it allows organizations to advance their safety objectives without discarding their hard-won victories. Extraordinary performance optimizes and enhances existing safety achievement. Its emergence signals to safety leaders at every level that safety performance has matured as a business focus. Always worthy of our best efforts, extraordinary safety is now within reach for many organizations.

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