

Overcoming the “Organizational Barriers” To Safety and Health Excellence

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Introduction

There are numerous tangible and intangible “organizational barriers” that can have a significant impact on safety and health performance. These barriers in some instances cannot be eliminated; however, ways of addressing them at the very least need to be employed if an organization desires to attain and sustain safety and health performance excellence. These “organizational barriers” and the successful ways of dealing with them will be discussed in this paper.

Safety Management “*Truths*”

Before we begin discussing the “organizational barriers” to safety excellence, some grounding with respect to fundamental safety management truths is necessary. The first truth is that Safety Management isn’t about preventing accidents; it is really about management learning how to better manage. Organizations that desire to attain excellence in safety and health need to understand that employees don’t come to work with the intention of getting hurt or killed. They get hurt for two reasons. First, management didn’t properly influence their behavior. Second, management didn’t provide a safe work environment. The bottom line is that management is obligated to protect their workers because in many cases they won’t protect themselves! Many workers are willing to trade-off their personal safety everyday for a paycheck unless management steps up and intervenes in the behaviors that lead to most incidents and takes the steps necessary to provide a safe work environment.

Along those lines, without proper role delineation and execution, safety and health performance can be managed...but never maximized. But, before management decides to step up, they must first understand their roles and how to execute their roles effectively. *Effective management behaviors and actions...will ultimately produce desired employee behaviors in safety.*

Another safety management truth is that management and supervision *at all levels* must be held to a high standard for safety excellence to be realized. The correct behaviors won’t be exhibited naturally. They must be learned and practiced. Along with this, it must be considered that strong incentives and disincentives will be needed to guide managers and supervisors safety management behaviors and outcomes!

Another safety management truth is that productivity, quality and financial return can never be maximized without first achieving safety performance excellence in any organization. The real bottom line is that worker safety and health is not an economic issue...*it's really an ethics issue!*

Finally, the last safety management truth is that organizations that attain safety performance excellence look much deeper than what appears on the surface. Organizations that continue to struggle with effectively managing safety performance need to look well beyond the typical safety issues confronting them every day. When they do, the answers will be more than obvious.

The “Organizational Barriers” ...Preventing Safety Performance Excellence

Organizational barriers that often prevent excellence in safety performance fall into several different categories. Individually and collectively, they can prevent an organization from attaining excellence and also derail those performing well. The following will highlight these barriers:

Production Output Barriers

Production output barriers are varied in their ability to promote individual and organizational risk taking. If they remain unchecked, organizations; both their management and individual workers, will take on unnecessary risk. These production output barriers include:

- Unregulated production output...*quantity of work produced*
- Unregulated production output...*pace or work*
- Unrealistic production goals or quotas
- Rate based employee production incentives
- Improperly allocated time to perform specified tasks

External Demand Barriers

External demand barriers can also have a profound effect on organizational safety performance. External forces precipitated by customers, the public as well as those created by individual workers can permit an organization and their management to expose workers unnecessarily to risk. These external factors include:

- Unrealistic customer deadlines
- Unrealistic customer specifications
- Board of Director /Stockholder demands e.g. downsizing, stock performance
- Public demands
- Secondary employment

Personnel Barriers

Personnel related barriers can put organizations and their management into precarious positions. These important human resource issues, if not carefully assessed and managed, can promote a risk tolerant culture. Sometimes these issues result from the organization trying to solve another problem; however, when they do so, additional exposure to employees and the overall organization is created. These personnel barriers include:

- Using less experienced or unskilled workers for wage-benefit savings
- Cutting labor allocation to reduce wage-benefit costs
- Uncontrolled and/or excessive overtime
- Substantial wage incentives paid to attract labor
- Substantial wage incentives paid for overtime work
- Inadequate work/rest regiments
- Erratic work schedules, e.g. swing shifts
- Overtaxing the *physical* limitations of workers
- Overtaxing the *mental* limitations of workers
- Unrealistic policies e.g. absenteeism, return to work

Financial Barriers

Financial barriers can affect organizational safety performance significantly. These barriers are ones dealing with the focus of the organization and its management, the resourcing of EHS activities, and policies that promote risk taking. These include:

- Obsessive management focus on the financials
- Management compensation based heavily on production output or revenues generated
- Underfunding of preventative maintenance, capital improvement, operating budgets, e.g. *Lean*
- Underfunding of EHS initiatives...staffing, budgets, training, equipment etc.
- Blanket no-overtime policies
- Mindless budget reduction mandates

Communications Barriers

Communications play a very important role in shaping a safety culture. What management says versus what it does can affect how managers, supervisors and workers think and act with respect to avoiding and minimizing risk. Communication type issues that need to be considered include:

- *Untrue* or unsupported Safety Philosophy statements
- Cultures that say “Safety is First” but demonstrates that it is not really A “do more with less”, “take risk” ...but “*be safe*” culture
- *Imbalanced* management communications focused heavily on *production* goals and/or financial results
- Invisibility of EHS performance in annual financial reports

Role Alignment Barriers

Proper role alignment is critical for successful safety performance. Line management must understand its roles. Conversely, EHS staff personnel also need to understand their roles and avoid performing line management safety activities if success is to be attained. Roles and responsibilities at all organizational levels need to be clearly established and executed. The following barriers need to be addressed to enhance a lackluster safety culture:

- Senior management is *plainly indifferent* to its safety management obligations
- Senior management *intentionally disregards* its safety management obligations
- Management-supervision EHS roles are undefined, unclear and unaccepted

- EHS staff personnel performs line management's EHS work for them

Training Barriers

Training of management, supervision and employees is critical for attaining and sustaining safety performance excellence. Management and supervision need training on their safety roles. These roles are just not “already known” by them. They also need to be trained on how to master these roles. Again, these skills are not always present. Workers also need ample training if they are to be expected to understand risks, how to avoid them and how to deal with them successfully. Barriers found in many organizations that are preventing them from attaining excellence include:

- Managers and supervisors are not formally trained re: EHS roles and execution
- Less trained workers are used due to cost savings
- Workers not trained re: task specific hazards, e.g. heavy reliance on on-the-job training processes
- Ineffective training methods and/or validation of training comprehension

Safety Governance Barriers

Safety governance in the workplace is a multi-faceted problem. Some organizations and their individuals operate like the “wild west” with respect to what is deemed acceptable from a safety behavior compliance perspective. Some organizations continually buck the regulators and the regulations. Related barriers often found in these organizations include:

- A lack of explicit rules and procedures, *strong* enforcement, and/or *serious* consequences
- A failure to maintain regulatory compliance
- The existence of a “minimal compliance...just clear the hurdle” culture
- Outright ignorance of regulatory requirements
- A lack of regulatory compliance auditing

Individual Performance Barriers

Many organizations do not attain safety performance excellence because they haven't created and maintained a simple culture of discipline. In those organizations, the following barriers are noted:

- A tolerance of frequent flyers or unsafe workers
- An admiration for “cowboys and risk takers”
- A lack of enforcement of Zero-tolerance
- A lack of accountability of underperforming employees to change or improve.

Management Accountability Barriers

A lack of formal and structured accountability mechanisms is a substantial barrier for many organizations. A lack of strong accountability mechanisms often works against the goal of getting line management to accept and fully execute their safety responsibilities. Barriers related to this include:

- Safety being MIA from position descriptions, performance reviews, salary and bonus allocation systems, and promotion reviews processes
- Safety performance having “minimal weight” within above

- Management accountability being *all talk and no action*
- Underperforming managers and supervisors not being *challenged*

Cost Ownership Barriers

Who owns the cost for incident losses in an organization says a great deal about who owns the safety responsibility. The inability to assess costs for losses will ultimately hamper safety ownership in any organization. Additionally, understanding the true cost of losses remains a mystery for many persons in managerial positions of authority. Organizational barriers in this area include:

- Management being uninformed re: true accident cost impact
- No process for incident cost charge-backs...a *Pot O' Gold* exists
- No future budget penalty allocation for poor performance

Performance Measurement Barriers

Effective performance objective and goal setting and the ongoing measurement of leading and trailing indicator performance are necessary drive improvement and to produce excellent safety performance results. This is a two-fold problem for many organizations. First goals and objectives are often focused on trailing indicators of safety performance. Second, subordinate safety activities (leading indicators) that facilitate organizational safety performance improvement and excellence are not being closely monitored on a continual basis. Specific organizational performance measurement barriers include:

- Established safety goals being unrealistic
- Safety goals being broad and not focused
- Safety goals not being understood
- *Trailing* performance measures being used as the primary *measure of success*
- *Leading* indicator performance not being reported and monitored in “real time” at all levels

Performance Recognition Barriers

Both “carrots and sticks” are needed to promote acceptance of safety management responsibilities and performance results. The “carrots” needed are as important as effective deterrents. Strong recognition and rewards are necessary to promote individual and organizational safety performance excellence. Organizations that struggle with respect to building an effective safety culture often are plagued by the following:

- *Managers and supervisors* not being recognized or rewarded for personal safety performance
- *Employees* not being recognized or rewarded for personal safety performance

Political Barriers

Politics is present in every organization at every level. Politics can derail a safety culture quickly if not nipped in the bud. Some political barriers include:

- Closed door senior level manager decision making process
- EHS staff being considered a necessary evil and *not really on the team*

- EHS staff being considered the enemy...*pushback is evident*
- *Lack of management courage demonstrating unbending expectations...* caused by a lack of superior or staff function support or a fear of worker or peer retaliation

Overconfidence Barriers

Sometimes there is overconfidence about the safety performance of the organization. This overconfidence is often driven by the facts that:

- The organizations statistical safety performance is better than average
- All Regulatory safety and health requirements are being met
- Serious or catastrophic events are very rare or have never occurred

What is the common thread among these issues? First, a significant *safety culture change* at the senior level is necessary for most organizations to overcome these “organizational barriers” successfully! Second, these barriers cannot be overcome by other organizational levels or functions without the timely and continual influence of senior management!

Overcoming the “Organizational Barriers”...*preventing safety performance excellence*

There are two significant questions Senior Managers need to ask themselves when confronted with an organizational barrier. These include:

1. What are the organizational safety ramifications of the barrier?
2. What can be done to address the barrier and to minimize organizational risk?

The barriers preventing any organization from attaining safety performance excellence can be overcome. The following nine steps for attaining safety excellence can be employed successfully in any organization. These steps form the roadmap for success.

Step 1- Define Reality

Any organization interested in attaining safety performance excellence needs to first understand where it stands and what needs to be addressed. This can be done using two primary methods including:

- *Safety Climate Survey conducted by an external 3rd party*
- *On-site Current State Assessment conducted by an external 3rd party*

Barriers with respect to effective safety management will need to be proven to the decision makers. This can rarely be done by EHS professionals from inside an organization.

Step 2- Enlighten Senior Management

Senior managers in the organization need to be informed continually of any and all organizational barriers precluding safety performance excellence and risk taking. They have legal, moral and ethical obligations to deal with these issues. Most senior managers lack a consideration for or awareness of how “organizational barriers” are affecting safety performance. They need to be told. And once told they need to draw their own conclusions and react accordingly.

Step 3- Let Senior Management Clear the Hurdles

Senior managers are in the best position to deal with organizational barriers once they are advised they exist. These issues are not small or inconsequential and need the senior manager’s position power for successful evaluation and resolution.

There are several ways to get senior managers to step up and begin the process of addressing these issues in a systematic way. First, establish a safety leadership team allowing the senior leader to use his or her position power to facilitate the evaluation and resolution of these barriers through the utilization of existing internal staff and line management resources. Second, once the team is established, have them address the “organizational barriers” one by one. The Team needs to first focus on role alignment, accountability and governance. These areas will form the foundation of the new safety culture.

Step 4 – Establish Accountabilities and Clear Expectations

Along with the above step, there will be a need to define safety management accountabilities and to establish clear expectations at all organizational levels. Accordingly, job descriptions will need to be modified to assure significant safety performance emphasis at the managerial, supervisory and worker levels.

The need to establish accountability through loss cost ownership will also need to be tackled. The organization will need to implement organizational /departmental accident cost charge-backs to budgets and find a way to assess future budget penalties for poor safety performance.

Establishing a disciplined safety-focused behavior will also be critical. Consequently, a disciplinary policy with strong corrective action process steps will be necessary. It needs to be non-progressive like traditional approaches but sequenced to assure significant consequences are in place to fit the severity of the incident i.e. “fit the crime”. The corrective action process or policy needs to be developed and applied in such a way that it is applicable to supervisors who condone or promote at risk behavior among workers. The policy should assure that rule deviations, incidents and injury events are treated the in the same consistent manner without interference from line managers or staff personnel. The ultimate goal is to have the process on “auto-pilot” when needed.

Step 5- Train on Expectations

It is important to facilitate training for Senior Managers regarding their safety management roles. Don’t assume they learned those roles in their MBA schools or somewhere along the corporate ladder. Additionally, training will need to be facilitated for middle managers and supervisors so that they clearly understand their safety management roles, their expected safety activities, along with the frequency and quality expectations of those activities.

Beyond training management, it is important to assure employees are effectively trained on task specific performance expectations and requirements. An organization needs to assure that OJT and/or classroom training provides sufficient exposure to the specific hazards that will be confronted when performing job tasks. Employees will also need training on rules and disciplinary consequences for undesired behaviors in an effort to ground them on what behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable.

Step 6 - Set Realistic Performance Goals

Once the above steps are completed, the organization is poised to begin its quest for safety performance excellence. At this juncture, it is important to establish attainable leading performance indicators and to set attainable trailing performance indicators. Heavy emphasis should be placed on the leading indicators. Trailing indicators should be focused at the manager-supervisor on actual issues, e.g. 20% reduction in back injuries as opposed to broad traditional measures. Broad trailing indicators should be set and measured at the organizational level only. Keep in mind that successful execution of these leading indicators among line managers and supervisors will ultimately drive trailing performance results.

Step 7 – Closely Measure and Monitor Performance

There are many ways to measure and monitor safety performance within an organization. Successful methods include: maintaining an ongoing and visible tally of safety activities performed by managers and supervisors, e.g. a dashboard, conducting annual stand-alone safety reviews for managers and supervisors, conducting 360 degree safety reviews for underperforming managers / supervisors, conducting annual safety performance reviews for employees, and publicizing manager/supervisor comparative peer safety performance results. All of the above are used by organizations that attain and sustain safety performance excellence.

Step 8 – Recognize, Reward and Punish Abundantly

In safety like anything else, what gets measured gets done. But what gets measured well and rewarded well *gets done well*. To assure safety activities are executed as desired organizations must revise salary and bonus review systems to assure *significant safety performance emphasis*. They must modify promotion criteria to assure *significant safety performance emphasis*. And they also must assure the safety recognition program *significantly rewards* individual and/or group accomplishments. The bottom line in everything, including safety is that *you pay for what you get and you get what you pay for!*

Step 9 – Get Extremely Focused To Sustain

The last step is as important as all the others but is often overlooked by most organizations. To attain and sustain safety performance excellence, the organization and its management must constantly focus on “the what” or the most frequent unresolved injury potentials and the most severe unresolved injury potentials. Most organizations are focusing on numerous safety issues simultaneously, effectively causing a lack of focus. Organizations also need to focus intently on “the talk” or said another way, the constant and consistent safety message that all employees need to hear. Finally, organizations need to focus on “the who.” They need to address the *problem children* as well as underperforming managers and supervisors. Those individuals are creating a

huge impact on overall organizational safety performance. If not successfully mentored and without their commitment, their lack of influence will continue to affect safety performance.

Conclusion

Safety performance is the *single most effective* measure of excellence in any organization! *But unfortunately safety performance excellence still eludes many, if not most, workplaces.* Still today, the sad realities are that nearly 50 American workers are injured every minute of every hour. Nearly 24,000 workers are injured every 8 hour work day in the U.S. Nearly four decades since the passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, only about 30 percent of businesses have established safety and health programs. These sad realities will remain unchanged unless we address the fundamental organizational barriers causing most of these deplorable statistics.