

Overcoming “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. In some instances, these barriers cannot be eliminated. However, ways of addressing them need to be employed at the very least if an organization desires to attain 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; and 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 trade off their personal safety for a paycheck every day unless management steps up and intervenes in the behaviors that lead to most incidents.

Along, those lines, without proper role delineation and execution, safety and health performance can be managed, but never maximized. Before management decides to step up, they must first understand their roles and how to execute their roles effectively. *Effective management behaviors 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 management and supervisory 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 achieving safety performance excellence first in any organization. The real bottom line is that worker safety and health is not an economic issue: *It's really an ethics issue!*

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 much deeper and 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, their management, and individual workers will take on unnecessary risk. These production output barriers include:

- Unregulated production output or *the quantity of work produced*
- Unregulated production output or *the 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 to expose workers unnecessarily to risk. These external factors include:

- Unrealistic customer deadlines
- Unrealistic customer specifications
- BOD/stockholder demands, e.g., downsizing, stock performance
- Public
- Secondary worker employment

Personnel Barriers

Personnel-related barriers can put organizations into precarious positions. 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 organization is created. These personnel barriers include:

- Use of less experienced workers due to cost savings
- Improper or “*short*” staffing, causing risk taking
- Uncontrolled and/or excessive overtime
- Substantial 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 deal 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, such as staffing, budgets, training, equipment, etc.
- Blanket no-overtime policies
- Mindless budget reduction mandates

Communications Barriers

Communications plays a very important role in shaping a safety culture. What management says verses 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* safety philosophy statements
- Cultures that say “Safety is First” but demonstrates that is really last
- “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 role. 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 issues 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 does 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. Issues found in many organizations that are preventing them from attaining excellence include:

- Managers and supervisors are not formally trained regarding EHS roles and execution
- Less-trained workers are used due to cost savings
- Workers not trained regarding task-specific hazards, e.g., heavy reliance on OJT processes

Safety Governance Barriers

Governance of safety 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

perspective. Some organizations continue to buck the regulators and the regulations. Related issues often found in these organizations include:

- *Explicit* rules and procedures, *strong* enforcement, and/or *serious* consequences are lacking
- Regulatory compliance is an ongoing struggle
- A “*minimal compliance...just clear the hurdle*” culture exists
- Outright ignorance of regulatory requirements exists
- Regulatory compliance auditing is discouraged

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 is noted:

- Frequent flyers are *tolerated*
- “Cowboy and risk takers” are *glorified*
- *Zero-tolerance* regarding rule violations is a *myth*
- Underperforming employees are not challenged in any meaningful way

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. Issues related to this include:

- Safety is MIA from position descriptions, performance reviews, salary and bonus allocation systems, and promotion review processes
- Safety has “minimal weight” within above
- Management accountability is *all talk and no action*
- Underperforming managers and supervisors are *not challenged*

Cost Ownership Barriers

Who owns the cost for 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 in managerial positions of authority. Organizational barriers in this area include:

- Management is uninformed regarding true accident cost impact
- No incident cost charge-backs; a *Pot O' Gold* exists
- No future budget penalties are allocated for poor performance

Performance Measurement Barriers

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

- Established safety goals are unrealistic
- Safety goals are broad and not focused
- Safety goals are not understood
- *Trailing* performance measures are used as the *measure of success*
- *Leading* indicator performance is not 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. The “carrots” necessary are as important, if not more so, than 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* are not recognized or significantly rewarded for personal safety performance
- *Employees* are not recognized or significantly 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. These barriers include:

- Closed-door decision-maker access
- EHS staff is a necessary evil and *not really on the team*
- EHS staff is the enemy; *pushback is evident*
- *Lack of management courage to demonstrate unbending expectation*, caused by a lack of superior or staff function support or a fear of worker or peer retaliation

What is the common thread among these “organizational issues?” First, a significant *safety culture change* is necessary for most organizations to overcome these organizational issues successfully! Second, all roads lead to senior management; these barriers cannot be overcome by other organizational levels or functions!

Overcoming the Organizational Barriers: Preventing Safety Performance Excellence

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 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.

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 are clueless regarding how “organizational barriers” are affecting safety performance. Frankly, 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 position power of the senior manager 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. Once the team is established, address the “organizational barriers” one by one. The first areas that need to be worked on are 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 disciplined behavior will also be critical. Consequently, a strong corrective action process will be necessary. It needs to be non-progressive like traditional approaches but stepped to assure significant consequences are in place to “fit the crime.” The corrective action process 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 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 classes. Additionally, training will need to be facilitated for middle managers and supervisors so that they clearly understand their safety management roles and their expected safety activities, along with the frequency and quality expectations of those activities. Beyond training management, it is important to assure that employees are effectively trained on task-specific performance expectations and requirements. An organization cannot assure that on-the-job (OJT) training or even formal classroom training provided them sufficient exposure to the specific hazards they will confront when performing their job tasks. Employees will also need training on rules and corrective action 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 on actual issues, e.g., 20% reduction in back injuries, as opposed to broad traditional measures. 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, e.g., safety sit-downs; 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

The last step is as important as all the others but is often overlooked by organizations. To attain excellence, the organization and its management must constantly focus on “what” are the most frequent unresolved injury potentials and the most severe unresolved injury potentials. Most organizations focus on numerous safety issues simultaneously, effectively causing a lack of focus. Next, organizations need to focus intently on the “talk” or, said another way, the constant and consistent message that employees need to hear. Finally, organizations also 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, their influence will continue to affect 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.* The sad realities of American worker safety are that nearly 50 American workers are injured every minute of every hour. Nearly 24,000 workers are injured every 8-hour workday in the U.S. And, 4 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 much of those deplorable statistics.