

Overcoming “Organizational Barriers” to Safety and Health Excellence

Samuel J. Gualardo, CSP
President
National Safety Consultants Inc.
Salix, PA

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 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. However, it is really about management learning how to better manage organizations that desire to attain excellence in safety and health. Employers need to understand that employees don’t come to work with the intention of getting hurt or killed. They have accidents 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 everyday 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!*

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 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...*quantity of work produced*
- Unregulated production output...*pace of 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 affect 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:

- Using 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 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
- Blanket no-overtime policies
- Mindless budget reduction mandates

Operational Barriers

Operational barriers go hand and hand with financial barriers. These include:

- Deliberate underfunding of operating, preventative maintenance and capital improvement budgets
- Exposing workers to inferior facilities, tools, equipment, work space
- Underfunding of EHS initiatives...*staffing, budgets, training, equipment etc.*

Turnover Barriers

Turnover or lack thereof can create barriers in organizations that place workers at risk. These can include:

- Cutting experienced workers and hiring less experienced workers for *wage-benefit savings*
- Permitting *job bidding and bumping* w/o training on task-specific hazards
- Unattractive workplace causing the “revolving door”
- Replacing leadership too often
- Not replacing “*good ole boys*” fast enough
- Marinating the “shallow generals”

Communications Barriers

Communication plays 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* 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 stockholder 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 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 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 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 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* re: 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 reviews processes
- Safety has "minimal weight" within the 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 re: true accident cost impact
- No incident cost charge-backs...a *Pot O' Gold* exists
- No future budget penalties 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” needed are as important as, if not more important 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

Overconfidence Barriers

Some organizations create barriers to safety performance excellence by performing well statistically and becoming overconfident in their success. As a result of their success they:

- Feel confident since statistical safety performance is *better than average*
- Believe that regulatory safety and health requirements *are being met and...Game Over!*
- Feel good since serious or catastrophic events are *rare or have never occurred*
- Push back when new initiatives are put forth to protect workers citing good historical performance
- *Rest on their laurels until the reality of a serious event shakes their confidence*

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 expectations...* caused by a lack of superior or staff function support or a fear of worker or peer retaliation

Dead Silence Barriers

Politics at times will create yet another barrier for organizations. As a result,

- People lack of courage to speak up when things are wrong
- People lack ability or skills to communicate concerns in a way that can be heard
- People become fearful of reprisals...and/or job loss
- People become fearful of being shunned by the “in crowd”
- Unresolved serious issues...*remain unresolved*

Focus Barriers

A lack of focus is also a major barrier found in many organizations. This lack of focus results in organizations:

- Wasting valuable energy and resources *to resolve insignificant safety issues*
- Trying to solve too many safety issues *simultaneously*
- Constantly *fighting fires*
- Going in too many directions *programmatically*
- Not converging resources on the *big ticket issues*

Risk Acceptance Barriers

Politics is present in every organization at every level. As a result, organizations and their personnel begin to:

- Promote *acceptable risk* culture w/o the supporting data
- Openly reward “risk taking”
- Believe that it will never happen...*or happen again*
- Expose human life to peril... *for the sake of the greater good*
- Act the same way...*after lives have been lost or workers have been injured*

Ethical Barriers

Many organizations continue to face ethical barriers preventing them from attaining and sustaining safety performance excellence. These include:

- Demonstrating a “*minimum compliance*” culture
- *Ignoring* regulatory requirements outright
- *Discouraging* regulatory compliance auditing
- *Intentionally under-reporting* regulatory performance or incidents

Managerial Ignorance Barriers

The last and probably most important barrier is management’s ignorance of these barriers and the need to address them to minimize worker and workplace risk exposure. This occurs when:

- There is intentional under-reporting of regulatory performance or incidents
- Management doesn’t care to look for the barrier... plainly indifferent
- Management knows about the barrier but continues to ignore it ... intentional disregard
- Management makes strategic decisions without considering the negative EHS consequences they may create

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 *that prevent safety performance excellence*”

The barriers preventing any organization from attaining safety performance excellence can be overcome. The following 7 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. Essentially, you need to look for “*what’s broke.*”

This can be done using two primary methods including:

- *Safety Climate Survey conducted by an external third party*
- *On-site Current State Assessment conducted by an external third party*
- *Internal strike teams*

Note: Barriers with respect to effective safety management will need to be proved to the decision makers...consider the internal implications of this and your capability of “telling the emperor he has no clothes.”

Step 2 - Get Extremely Focused

To attain excellence, the organization and its management must constantly focus on the most frequent and most severe unresolved injury potentials, e.g., barriers to excellence. This needs to be done in an effort to properly determine which specific “*organizational barriers*” could be having the biggest impact. Unfortunately most organizations are focusing on numerous safety issues simultaneously, effectively causing a lack of focus. Only when the major barriers are determined can the next logical step of developing a potential solution occur.

Step 3- 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 re: 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 4- Let Senior Management Clear the Hurdles

Senior managers are in the best position to deal with organizational barriers once they are advised that 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 needed to be worked on are role alignment, accountability and governance. These areas will form the foundation of the new safety culture.

Step 5 – Establish Clear Accountabilities and 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 to resolve each barrier. Policies, procedure etc. may need to be modified and performance expectations must become crystal clear for everyone in the organization if there is any expectation that the barrier will be resolved.

Step 6 – Closely Measure and Monitor Performance

Critical to successfully overcoming the barrier will be close monitoring of any change that occurs, either positive or negative. Successful measuring and monitoring methods include: the use of safety climate surveys, onsite interviewing assessments, and physical audits to discern progress made or lack thereof. Additionally, results must be “pipelined” to senior management directly on a frequent basis so they can take the necessary action if progress is not occurring as planned.

Step – 7 Address Strategic Decision-Making

The last step in this process is to prevent these barriers from resurfacing in the future. To do that, long-term strategic decision-making will need to be evaluated. Following this evaluation, a process will need to emerge that requires decisions affecting the risk of workers or the workplace to “pass muster” in some meaningful way. Suggested methods include, establishing a “devils advocate” review team, the development and implementation of a strategic decision-making model, anointing EHS leaders as the “protected moral compass”...without fear of reprisal from any level, etc.

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 work day in the U.S. And, in the 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 many of those deplorable statistics.