

Improving Safety Culture? Developing Laser Focused Safety Vision

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Introduction

What's the difference between the lights in a parking lot and the light of a laser? Parking lot lights illuminate large areas, providing just enough light to find your car, without casting so much as to disrupt a neighboring home or business. In contrast, the light of a laser is so intense that it can slice through steel or be used in intricate surgical applications.

Today we find ourselves managing highly integrated and often complex organizational processes. You may have heard this referred to as "big picture management." While a broad-based view is often vitally important to an organization, it is usually not enough to motivate or inspire people to aggressively achieve success in their accountable management system area. Whether we manage production, quality, procurement or the safety function, it's imperative that each functional management area understand the organization's mission to deploy laser-focused actions that contribute to success. A "big picture" approach alone is insufficient. Success can only be truly achieved when "big picture" and laser-focused visions are combined to achieve synergistic results.

Several years ago, I was working with a group of other safety professionals to develop a new safety vision for the organization. In all honesty, I wasn't sure I wanted to be part of the discussion after I failed to move the group past what I felt was a short-sighted vision statement adopted by the team. The statement read something like this: "As a company, we are to promote and support occupational safety and to manage in a manner that seeks to eliminate occupational injuries and illnesses." While it might have looked nice on paper, it came up short in terms of our actual mission; namely, to protect our people, processes, and products. If our safety vision was to stop loss, why didn't we just say so?

You Must Be Able to Articulate the Vision

When it comes to improving safety in the workplace, the first question to ask is: What is our laser-focused vision for safety success, and are we experiencing a level of success that truly supports this vision? Are all employees actively implementing this vision on a daily basis? If not, why not? Political commentator Richard Brookhiser once said during Ronald Reagan's presidential tenure: "Reaganism could be jotted down on the back of a business card." It was simply, "defeat communism and cut taxes." What didn't fit on the back of a business card, Brookhiser said, could safely be ignored. If you can't articulate your vision, you won't be able to communicate it to others or motivate people to achieve defined goals.

Symptoms of a Bad Vision Statement

The symptoms of a bad vision statement include:

- It confuses vision with goals and objectives, or it describes the process and method rather than the outcome, without providing a measure of success.
- It does not have a powerful introduction that captures the memory or does not evoke emotion or passion.

Your vision statement must communicate both the purpose and values of the organization. It should also be clear, concise and geared toward success, while inspiring employees to deliver their best and safest work. It is also worth noting that a great vision statement can also help shape external perceptions of your organization. To explain, the following vision statement is from a major and well-known Fortune 100 company:

Our vision serves as the framework for our Roadmap and guides every aspect of our business by describing what we need to accomplish in order to continue achieving sustainable, quality growth.

- *People: Be a great place to work where people are inspired to be the best they can be.*
- *Portfolio: Bring to the world a portfolio of quality beverage brands that anticipate and satisfy people's desires and needs.*
- *Partners: Nurture a winning network of customers and suppliers, together we create mutual, enduring value.*
- *Planet: Be a responsible citizen that makes a difference by helping build and support sustainable communities.*
- *Profit: Maximize long-term return to shareowners while being mindful of our overall responsibilities.*
- *Productivity: Be a highly effective, lean and fast-moving organization.*

At best, the statement is simply too broad, covers too much territory, and would never generate the excitement required to actualize it without a department of people charged with explaining the vision. Can you imagine being the person at the end of the production line reading it?

In contrast, there are many organizations that simply get it and use such statements to provide guidance, direction, and focus. Actually, some of the best vision statements I have reviewed seem to have been developed under some sort of duress or during times when things

were quite unclear. To explain, read the following vision statements from what many would consider leading organizations:

To build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online (Amazon)

To give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected (Facebook)

To provide branded products and services of superior quality and value that improve the lives of the world's consumers (Proctor and Gamble)

To become the most successful premium manufacturer in the car industry (BMW)

Simply, great organizations master a communication strategy in a way that paints a picture of the end goal and reminds you that it can be achieved.

Vision Is a Shared Accountability

So, what is *your* vision for safety success? For too many organizations, it's focused on reducing or mitigating loss. Does this kind of safety vision engage or excite you? If not, how can it possibly excite those who are expected to demonstrate these behaviors on a daily basis? Would someone who looked at your vision statement quickly recognize your safety values and how safety factors into your organization? A laser-focused safety vision can be a powerful tool for engaging employees, elevating expectations and driving a sense of ownership that takes people out of their comfort zones. Consider the following for developing a laser-focused safety vision for your organization:

- **Seek multiple perspectives. Assess your organization from top to bottom and inside out:**
 - Ask employees what motivates and inspires their commitment to safety, and whether the current safety vision aligns with their perspectives.
 - Gather external feedback, and don't be discouraged if comments from the manufacturing floor do not align with comments from the front office.
- **Look for natural safety champions in your organization and assemble a "vision team:"**
 - It's crucial to take the time to assemble a team of dedicated personnel from all levels of the organization who share your passion for and dedication to safety.
- **Review your organization's safety goals and objectives before crafting the safety vision:**
 - Without a clear understanding of what you hope to achieve, it's impossible to realize your safety objectives. Document these goals, and ensure that all members of the safety team have ownership and commitment to achieving them.
- **Once you have reviewed your goals and objectives, start working on a laser-focused safety vision for your organization:**
 - Your vision statement should be brief and to the point. If it is more than one or two sentences, you will struggle to communicate its purpose and value. A single phrase or sentence works best.

- Remember, the true measure of success is to create a safety vision that is compelling and memorable. If employees can't remember it, they will be less likely to help you realize it.
- **After completing the safety vision statement, test it in draft form with employees, friends and colleagues outside your organization:**
 - Remember, if the statement doesn't inspire, it is not going to work. By sharing drafts, you'll work toward gathering support for your vision.
 - Don't discount the value of stakeholder buy-in, which extends the reach of the safety process and helps build advocacy within your organization.
- **Endorsement is a critical step in this process and should not be taken lightly:**
 - Since your laser-focused safety vision statement is a values-based statement, endorsement from others is crucial. It is the stamp of approval that signifies the collective agreement that will help you realize the vision.
 - Many great visions fail because of poor endorsement practices. If done right, you can move past a workforce of safety advocates to a workforce of safety ambassadors who sponsor and implement the vision.
- **Finally, communicate your laser-focused safety vision broadly throughout the organization:**
 - If you have a safety website, post the vision there, and consider it the first conversation in an ongoing dialogue.
 - Keep the focus on safety by including relevant content and success stories in a wide variety of employee communications.
 - Consider beginning team meetings by restating your laser-focused safety vision. The key is to be creative and to ensure that your safety vision is always top of the mind in your organization.

In Closing

I'm reminded of a quote from the late Yogi Berra, who said: "You've got to be careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there." Frankly, Yogi hit it out of the park with that simple statement. In occupational safety, I've watched too many peers work from a "to-do" list rather than truly embracing and leading safety in their organizations. While I'm certain there are reasons for working this way, the reality is that it's impossible to "luck" your way into safety success. Without a laser-focused safety vision and the resulting core list of goals and objectives, safety success will be at best limited and very likely, not sustainable. As leaders, our jobs are to not only be technically proficient, but to inspire, energize, and motivate others to achieve success. As safety leaders, our chief responsibilities are to aggressively pursue a vision for safety that leads to the best possible outcomes—the safety and well-being of our employees.

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