

The Five Cultural Barriers to Workplace Safety

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Introduction

“What do you want me to do—save money or save lives? You can’t have it both ways.” This was said by a frustrated manager who felt whipsawed by these competing values. Of course he knew the company motto, “Safety comes first,” but he also knew they weren’t in business to be safe but to build product.

Many organizations face this challenge: they value safety, but maintaining a safe workplace often provides little strategic advantage. It’s easy to find ROI reasons to fund productivity, quality and efficiency, but safety is a cost center. Of course, there are business reasons for maintaining a safe workplace. Injuries are costly, and in some industries, a poor safety record can disqualify a company from new bids and contracts. But in most organizations, workplace safety is more about values than it is about business.

My research team spent the last several years studying organizations that have “broken the code” on safety—companies that have extraordinary safety records—and we have an amazing discovery to report. First a bit of background.

We were working with Mike Wildfong, general manager at TI Automotive, a firm with an exceptional safety record. Mike and his team maintain an obsessive focus on keeping people safe, and we asked him why. Here’s how he explained it, “I use safety as the leading edge of accountability. We need accountability to achieve the quality, productivity and cost targets we set, but I start with safety. If I can’t achieve accountability around safety, then I can’t achieve accountability around anything.”

Mike and the other safety-focused executives we studied use safety as an accountability incubator. They build a culture of accountability where everyone holds everyone accountable for safe practices. The brilliant leap they made is that once they achieved this level of accountability around safety, they could employ it to improve quality, productivity, cost control, customer service, etc.

So, Mike and his peers deny there’s a tradeoff between saving money and saving lives. They argue for the reverse. They believe managers who hold people accountable succeed at everything—safety, quality, productivity, etc. And likewise, managers who don’t hold people accountable fail at everything.

Study #1 Safety and Accountability

We put this idea to the test by examining 420 supervisors and managers, divided into two groups. The leaders in the first group were selected because they held their people accountable for every aspect of safety. The leaders in the second group were selected because they did not. We wanted to test whether there were tradeoffs between safety and other priorities or whether accountability in safety predicted success across all priorities.

The findings couldn't be more dramatic. When we compared the 20 percent of leaders who focused the most on safety to the other 80 percent, the safety-focused leaders were five times more likely to also be in the top 20 percent on productivity, quality, efficiency and employee satisfaction.

Our data showed that being the best in workplace safety makes you the best in each of these other areas. And these results held true across industries as different as oil and gas exploration, chemical manufacturing, power generation and construction. Regardless of the industry, the leaders who are best at holding their people accountable for safety also achieve the best quality, productivity and efficiency.

This study shows the strategic importance of the norms, skills and behaviors involved in accountability. It's clearly an area every leader should master. But what does it mean to master accountability?

Accountability is Not about Blame and Punishment

Some leaders believe accountability is all about blame and punishment—find the guilty party and sanction them. Is this what our high-accountability leaders did? To find out, we measured each leader along two dimensions.

1. The analytical side of accountability: Did the leader tend to analyze safety problems by *singling out and blaming* or by *diagnosing and understanding*?
2. The interpersonal side of accountability: Did the leader tend to resolve safety problems by *threatening and punishing* or by *explaining and involving*?

Our high-accountability leaders were 3.4 times more likely than the rest to emphasize explaining and involving and diagnosing and understanding techniques when faced with safety concerns. They round throughout their operation to discover problems, speak up when they have concerns, diagnose the causes of problems, reach decisions on solutions and follow up to ensure success. Many used quality tools like the “5 Why’s” and communication training tools like Crucial Conversations to understand and address accountability issues that, if left unresolved, led to an increase of errors and accidents. Perhaps this is why these high-accountability leaders also lead the pack in employee satisfaction.

Randy Arnott, the director of Environment, Health, and Safety at Cree Industries describes what he sees when one of these high-accountability managers moves into a department, “The first

thing you notice is that the area is cleaner. Equipment and tools are in their places, and the floor is clear of raw material, cables and hoses. Next, you see a flurry of maintenance. Machines that have been hobbling along, requiring extra attention, are either fixed or removed. Then you begin to see process improvements. Process flows are rationalized and streamlined. With each of these steps the new leader is driving improvements in safety, quality, productivity and costs.”

These high-accountability leaders apply quality and communication principles and tools, rather than blame and punishment. For example, they use performance data to locate problems; use tools from Six Sigma, Lean Manufacturing and the Toyota Production System to diagnose problems; and then, they use a variety of communication skills to hold people—operators, maintenance, engineering and their own managers—accountable for implementing solutions.

Build a Culture of Accountability

In some organizations, a good excuse can substitute for good performance. There is more finger pointing than accountability. In these firms it’s the exceptional leaders who accept and demand accountability. But imagine what can be accomplished with a culture of accountability—an organization where every leader and every employee feels ownership for results and holds one another accountable.

Every organization strives to create this culture of accountability, but it’s incredibly challenging. The mistake most leaders make is to rely too exclusively on a single source of influence—a training program, an incentive system or a promotional campaign—to drive the change. These leaders quickly find the status quo exerts more gravity than they realized. The culture may budge a little, but is soon pulled back into the familiar orbit with all its blame games, finger pointing and other low-accountability behaviors.

The reason the status quo is so hard to change is that the world is perfectly organized to produce the current results. The status quo doesn’t stem from a single root cause, but from multiple root causes. These causes include personal values and skills, social norms and practices and organizational incentives and structures. We group these causes into the Six Sources of Influence™, described below:

1. **Personal Motivation:** Holding others accountable must be a moral imperative. People need to find meaning and take pride in their ability to hold others accountable.
2. **Personal Ability:** People need the skills required to diagnose and understand the root causes of problems. They also need the communication skills required to explain and involve, instead of threaten and punish.
3. **Social Motivation:** Social norms must encourage, rather than punish, people when they try to hold others accountable. The organizational culture needs to expect and demand accountability.
4. **Social Ability:** People must be able to count on support from their managers and peers when they try to hold someone accountable.
5. **Structural Motivation:** The formal reward system (performance reviews, pay, promotion and perks) needs to encourage, rather than ignore or discourage, accountability.
6. **Structural Ability:** The environmental structure, including established times, places, forums and tools, needs to be organized in a way that makes it easy to hold others accountable.

It's common to find barriers to accountability in each of the Six Sources of Influence. Sometimes multiple barriers exist within a single source. Creating a culture of accountability requires addressing each of these barriers and building positive support within each source. Our research shows that initiatives are 10 times more likely to succeed when leaders combine all six of these sources of influence.

So, creating a culture of accountability will be difficult and requires a multifaceted approach. But many of the exceptionally safe organizations we've studied have discovered the path to this culture of accountability—this path begins with workplace safety.

Workplace Safety as the “Leading Edge” of Accountability

Which organizational priority has the greatest personal value for you? Is it cost control, customer satisfaction, productivity, quality or workplace safety? Or is it the firm's profitability or shareholder equity? The respondents in our study were clear. Nearly half selected “workplace safety” more than twice as much as the runner up, customer satisfaction.

It shouldn't be too surprising that people come to work already caring about their own personal safety and the safety of their teammates. And yet, personal motivation is often the missing ingredient in most of the culture-change efforts that fail.

Here is the challenge. When the behaviors required in the new culture are not personally motivating, then leaders have to rely on external incentives or even punishments to keep them going. And, if the firm ever lets up on enforcement, then people stop the new behaviors, because *they don't like doing them*.

So, a major barrier to creating an accountability culture is that most people don't like holding others accountable, and they don't want to. Managers say it's the least favorite part of their jobs, and employees say, “If I'd wanted to have to hold people accountable, I'd have become a manager.” But workplace safety is an area where the organization can connect to values that are already deeply held by their employees.

People don't invest themselves in just any cause. After all, these moral investments define who we are. Taking ownership for a set of results is an act of self identity that engages our ethics, morals and passions. Research shows we are far more willing to invest ourselves in causes that involve human consequences. This is especially true when we have a personal relationship with the people who are impacted. Few employees invest themselves in abstract results such as share prices, productivity numbers or returns on investments. But they can become passionately invested when the results involve their own personal safety and the safety of their friends and co-workers.

Safety is also an area where social pressure can be applied. Mike Wildfong also said this of holding others accountable to safety, “How is anyone going to object to safety? If you come to me and say you don't want to be held accountable for keeping people safe, that's a major tell. You're signaling you don't want to be held accountable, period. That you don't want to be on the accountability bus.”

A Case Study: Pride International

Headquartered in Houston, Texas, Pride International, Inc. is one of the world's largest offshore drilling contractors. Pride provides contract drilling and related services to oil and gas companies worldwide. With approximately 4,000 employees, Pride offers a multinational workforce with offices in the United States, Angola, Brazil, India, Mexico and Saudi Arabia.

Pride employees are regularly put through myriad safety training programs such as Job Safety Environmental Analysis, the DuPont STOP process, Step Back 5x5 and others. In 2007, while serving as regional vice president, Gulf of Mexico, Chris Johnston implemented training that showed how to handle the dangerous situations identified by Grenny and Maxfield (2010). These conversations include:

1. **Get It Done.** Unsafe practices that are justified by tight timelines.
2. **Undiscussable Incompetence.** Unsafe practices that stem from skill deficits that can't be discussed.
3. **Just this Once.** Unsafe practices that are justified as exceptions to the rule.
4. **This Is Overboard.** Unsafe practices that bypass precautions considered excessive.
5. **Are You a Team Player?** Unsafe practices that are justified for the good of the team, company or customer.

Pride held 2.5-day courses for approximately 21 managers and supervisors at a time near its area headquarters in Houma, Louisiana. Overall, approximately 500 employees were trained that year.

"The feedback from the guys was overwhelmingly positive," said Johnston. "They said this was one of the best things we ever did." The average course evaluation was 9.1 out of 10.

More importantly, the employees not only liked the training, they actually implemented the skills on the job. In the year following training, turnover decreased by 40 percent, and the company did not have a single accident that required employees to miss time on the job. Most impressive, the total incident rate at Pride improved by 55 percent. Two years later, Johnston said he still hears the terminology from the course used on the rigs, "If they stop using it they get a reality check because other guys call them on it. Everybody is speaking the same language."

Steps Leaders Can Take

There are several steps leaders can take to build a culture of accountability within their organizations.

First, leaders must recognize the central role accountability plays in achieving every other priority. When peers look out for each other, watch each others' backs and hold each other accountable, it supercharges everything the organization strives to accomplish.

Second, leaders should build a culture of accountability that begins with workplace safety. Additionally, within safety, the high-accountability leaders we studied took special care to

build personal motivation. They took special care to connect accountability to the personal values related to workplace safety.

Third, leaders need to define the vital behaviors involved in “accountability.” These are the two or three clearly defined actions that capture the essence of what accountability means. Examples include:

“I speak up and hold people accountable for creating and maintaining a safe workforce, regardless of their role or position.”

“When I have a concern that someone is being unsafe or creating unsafe conditions, I take action to make sure the problem is addressed—first by speaking directly and respectfully with the person, and then, if unsuccessful, by escalating to those who should be responsible.”

As Mike Wildfong said, “Every manager, supervisor and employee needs to sign up to ride this accountability bus.”

Fourth, leaders should focus on a handful of crucial moments—times and circumstances when it’s especially important to speak up and hold others accountable. Grenny and Maxfield (2010) identify five of these crucial moments that have a disproportionate impact on safety. When leaders focus their efforts on this handful of crucial moments, instead of spreading themselves too thin, they can achieve rapid improvements.

Fifth, leaders need to marshal a critical mass of all Six Sources of Influence. The high-accountability leaders we studied aimed all Six Sources of Influence at improving the two or three vital behaviors in the handful of crucial moments. They added an overwhelming combination of training, incentives, structural changes and social support to the personal motivation that was already there.

Finally, we were surprised to find a number of firms that have achieved remarkable advances in workplace safety, but then failed to transfer this success to their quality, productivity and cost control initiatives. This failure to transfer seems to stem from two quite different causes. We’ve found that some organizations have achieved improved safety through better systems and tools but haven’t really built an accountability culture. Often, their safety improvements, while dramatic, top out well before they achieve a completely safe workplace. There really is no tool or process that can replace total accountability.

Other times, successes in safety don’t transfer because leaders don’t understand what made their safety program so successful. Often they used all Six Sources of Influence with workplace safety, but used only two or three sources in their other initiatives. Other times, leaders think accountability in one area will transfer automatically to every other area. Of course, it will for those employees who see the connection. But most will either fail to see the connection or wait for permission to hold their peers and bosses accountable for quality, productivity and cost control. These employees aren’t sure it’s what the organization wants. In these cases, leaders need to make the connection clear and compelling.

In summary, we believe many safety and other priorities have been constrained by the outdated and inaccurate belief that you can't have it all. Once leaders understand that accountability is the operating system that drives all of their applications—safety, quality, productivity, cost control, etc.—they can stop pitting one priority against another and work to achieve a culture of accountability that supports bottom-line metrics across the board. And it's especially rewarding that the first step along this path to success is one that also saves lives.

Bibliography

Grenny, J., and Maxfield, D. "Accidents Waiting to Happen: The Five Crucial Conversations that Drive Workplace Safety." *EHS Today*, 2010.