STEPS to Safety Culture Excellence

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Is Improving Safety Culture Too Complicated?

Have you ever thought that improving your safety culture was too complicated and would take too long to really be worthwhile? What if you could break up this huge project into a series of logical and well-defined steps and take them at your own pace? You can! That is the message of this talk based on the recent book from John Wiley & Sons, Inc. You can improve your safety culture through a series of "STEPS" (Strategic Targets for Excellent Performance in Safety), guiding you through each milestone along the way. Chances are, you have already taken some of these steps and can move on to the next one.

The first of the suggested STEPS is to decide if you want to pursue Safety Culture Excellence and to explore the rationale and potential benefits of such a journey. Some safety cultures are simply not ready for the trip, while others are so advanced that they may only want to fine tune their efforts with some of these STEPS. The milestones you pass on your journey to Safety Culture Excellence are labeled as follows**: Strategy, Assessment, Clarity, Climate, Chemistry, Control,** and **Continuous-Improvement**. Let's discuss each of these in a little more detail.

Strategy

Strategy is not something most organizations have developed for safety. They may have programs and goals and desires, but not a comprehensive plan for accomplishment. The approach taken in this methodology is to compare other typical business strategies that are more familiar to leaders and challenge them to take the elements of these strategies and apply them to safety. Once you have followed the prescribed steps to develop a comprehensive safety strategy, the programs, processes and efforts can be aligned to create a more synergized effort toward well-defined goals. The strategy includes ways to build buy-in and increase participation in safety and to better communicate details of the effort to the organizational population.

Assessment

Once the strategy is in place, the next set of STEPS lead to an **Assessment** of the current status of the organizational safety culture. Some argue that the assessment should precede the development of strategy, but our experience suggests that an assessment in the absence of an overarching

strategy is more of a gap analysis and problem-solving approach than a true strategic approach. The assessment should discover how to best accomplish the strategy rather than define the elements of the strategy based on need. True leadership is much more than firefighting and problem solving. It is the setting of goals and strategies based on the true mission and vision of the organization. Once the organization knows its mission and strategy, it can truly assess its current location and navigate toward its strategic targets.

Clarity

The next milestone is **Clarity**. Clarity is not possible without a strategic definition and working knowledge of the current situation, which are accomplished in the first two milestones. Clarity involves developing shared definitions of key terms such as "safety", "accident", "precaution", etc., as well as making sure that every member of the organization has a vision of the journey to Safety Culture Excellence and is focused on the current targeted STEP. In short, clarity is designed to create alignment of vision toward each STEP along the journey in order to maximize effectiveness and efficiency of effort. Many safety efforts define their goals in terms of lagging indicators that are relatively meaningless and vague to the average person in the organization. STEPS is designed to create a vivid image of what success looks like and the steps along the road to accomplishment.

Climate

With the completion of the STEPS leading to the first three milestones, the organization is ready to prepare the soil and tend the garden in which they have planted the seeds of safety excellence. The first element of this effort is to create the **Climate** which facilitates the growth of the desired safety culture. Many experts argue that the culture is the result of the climate and that the climate is the true control point. We believe it is one of two control points, both of which are critical to the facilitation of Safety Culture Excellence. The climate is the weather in which excellence grows. If the climate is too hot or too cold or too dry or wet, the plant does not prosper. Does the climate of your organization make the average worker feel nurtured toward safety excellence or does it intimidate or demotivate? The STEPS in this milestone will challenge you to examine the key elements of your organizational climate and tune them, if needed, to facilitate the growth of excellent safety performance.

Chemistry

The other key control point of culture is what we refer to as **Chemistry**. Just as a tender plant needs the right temperature and moisture in the air, it also needs the right composition in the soil. This section asks the question, "What elements does a molecule of excellent safety culture contain?" Each element becomes a STEP toward this milestone. You are challenged to examine your organization and see if the elements are alive and well. If so, you can move on. If not, there are a series of suggested measures to help you develop the desired state. We compare this milestone to taking a soil sample to the agricultural agent and getting an analysis that prescribes how to enrich the soil to facilitate the growth of your plant. Many organizations sow the seeds and let them die in a hostile and non-nourishing environment. The goal of Safety Culture Excellence is not simply a moment of acceptable results, but the knowledge and ability to repeat excellent performance year after year.

Control

Once your organization has created or perfected the correct climate and chemistry for growing safety excellence, you can watch the plant grow and prune it to the shape your strategy has defined. This pruning we call **Control**. Control is really the ultimate goal of safety, but it cannot be attained and maintained in the absence of these other critical elements. It is a destination that must be reached in STEPS and not a single leap. Control will give your organization the ability to successfully address the potential risks and safety challenges with tactics that align with your overall strategy and are supported by clarity of purpose and a climate and chemistry of nurturing excellence. There are two main elements that are the targets of safety controls - conditions and common practice.

Conditions

Conditions include the physical environment in which people work as well as the engineering of equipment and defined processes of work flow. Conditions that impact safety can include the amount and shape of work space, pinch points and trip hazards, line-of-fire issues with moving equipment, standardization of workplace controls, temperature extremes, defined pathways, signage and a host of other issues. Conditions can create risks for workers that need to be addressed either conditionally or behaviorally. But they can also create obstacles or barriers to behavioral safety. These are conditions that limit a worker's ability to take precautions or to work in the safest manner. These include tools and equipment being too far from where they are needed, broken seat belts, the lack of tie offs for fall protection and other similar conditions.

Common Practice

Common Practice is often referred to simply as behavior. But in this instance, we are referring to behaviors that are common and culturally acceptable within your organization. STEPS does not try to artificially force individuals to change their behaviors and work against conditional or cultural barriers. The control of common practice involves understanding the influences in your workplace that impact worker behaviors and addressing them. If you change the behavior of a worker but leave the influences working against safety, the next worker to take that position may also need behavioral change. If you change the influences and then the culture, you can actually accomplish a more lasting and sustainable change for everyone. The control of common practice can involve modifying an existing behavior-based safety process or incorporating the key elements of organizational behavior into the STEPS process.

Continuous Improvement

The final step of the process is **Continuous Improvement**. Those who follow the STEPS process discover that excellence is a journey, not a destination. Like any form of human performance, safety excellence takes regular practice and adaptability to ever-evolving challenges. Each STEP in the process and each milestone along the journey may need to be revisited if the organization decides to manufacture a new product, offer a new service, install new equipment, upsize or downsize the workforce, or sometime it is necessary just over the course of normal workforce evolution. Excellence, like readiness, must be maintained and not simply achieved. The goals accomplished at each STEP and milestone will be challenged not only by change but by entropy.

Even the leaders and practitioners of the methodology will have to do succession planning for their own positions to ensure continuity and sustainability of excellent performance supported by an excellent culture.

Each of the milestones outlined is broken down into a series of STEPS which can be accomplished at a pace that fits your organization. You may read about a STEP and discover that you have already taken it and no further effort is necessary. Other STEPS may require more time and effort. If you have seasonal demands, you can focus on Safety Culture Excellence more when time allows and put it on the back burner during rush times. You can move quickly or more slowly and deliberately toward your goals and adjust along the way. The Chinese have an old saying that has been quoted and re-quoted by many scholars and seekers of truth over the ages, "Even a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Once your organization learns how to take a STEP toward more excellent safety performance and culture, you have mastered the basic unit of improvement and there is no end to where you can go, one STEP at a time.