



FOCUS ARTICLE

Achieving Operational Excellence Through Operational Discipline

Operational excellence, which must include an impeccable safety record, is an outcome that all companies strive for. The secret to reaching this universal goal is focusing on the input, the combination of behaviours, attitudes and actions—culture, in short—most likely to yield the desired results. Operational discipline unites these elements and paves the way to achieving operational excellence.

Operational Excellence Is an Outcome

Every organisation strives for operational excellence, aiming for optimal production combined with an unblemished safety record and highly engaged employees--the industrial equivalent of a flow state where the entire company is “in the zone”. In industries where the stakes are particularly high, as in the oil and gas or chemical sector, this level of performance takes on a special urgency, as it can literally save lives. What is important to remember, however, is that operational excellence, like safety, is an outcome. It cannot be delivered ready-made, but evolves or arises from consistent attention to mastery of the right combination of factors, or what we call operational discipline.

Do the Right Thing, the Right Way, Every Time

Operational discipline refers not only to specific behaviours or actions, but also to how they are carried out and become part of a practice, process or policy. It refers, as well, to the attitude individuals bring to their tasks and the level of consistency they achieve. In short, it means doing the right thing, the right way, every time.

Breaking down this seemingly simple formula into its component parts reveals its underlying complexity. First, doing the right thing presupposes a certain level of knowledge about the task at hand and an understanding of why it needs to be done or what’s at stake. Doing it the right way might require a specific skill set or training as well as the sense of how the task fits into the big picture. It brings

the employee and their behaviour into alignment with the company's goals and values and, ideally, makes the individual aware of how his or her actions are part of something larger. The final dictate, "every time", is all about consistency, and demands that workers develop a questioning attitude in an attempt to anticipate what could go wrong. Operational discipline is the harmonious conjunction of all these moving parts, and it ensures a beneficial level of predictability and reliability in company activities.

Operational Discipline as Antidote to Danger

In the absence of operational discipline, an organisation can easily find itself grappling with phenomena that hinder optimal performance and undercut efforts to establish operational excellence. The "paradox of safety", for example, as described by James Reason, includes the observation that safety is often measured by absence. This means that the lack of damaging or fatal incidents is considered indicative of safe operations, rather than the presence of safe behaviours and protective measures. This tendency to equate zero incidents with optimal safety leads to a reactive posture, whereby an organisation only acts to shore up safety in the wake of an incident, after often irreversible damage has occurred. On the other hand, with the cultivation of strong operational discipline, employees are trained to see the architecture of a potential incident before it happens and to act preventively every time.

Related to the paradox of safety is the "optimism bias", which also easily infects operations and underlies what has been referred to since the Texas City disaster as "casual compliance". The optimism bias describes an attitude that regards the absence of past incidents as reason to assume no future incidents will take place. Individuals may be essentially unconscious that they hold such a view, but it could manifest as casual compliance, a sense that the rules governing workplace behaviour should be taken as general guidelines and that shortcuts are viable options. Under these conditions risk blindness develops as employees no longer even perceive the dangers lurking in their everyday activities. Here, too, operational discipline is the remedy. When the workforce does the right thing the right way every time, it effectively counteracts unfounded optimism and all its pitfalls.

A Culture of Care

If company culture can be summed up as "how we do things here", its importance to operational discipline is clear: organisational culture plays a leading role. We might consider performance as the

interplay of three basic organisational components: equipment and assets; processes and procedures; and people. Culture arises from how people interact with processes and procedures, and it is influenced by the quality of leadership.

At DEKRA, experience has taught us that developing a **culture of care** is key. In all areas of our life, when we care about something, we show concern for it, we pay attention to it, we invest time and energy in it. This is true in a work environment as well. When employees care about their tasks, then carrying them out properly and consistently becomes second nature. Workforce training and education with an emphasis on developing care as both a mindset and behaviour strengthens operational discipline. Effective leadership, rooted in a commitment to a culture of care, however, is crucial.

It is often the case that individuals become leaders because of their technical skills, knowledge and experience. Once they assume a leadership role they continue to focus on the technical side of operations and become masters of task allocation. An emphasis on what needs doing might ignore or downplay how it's being done, which is at the core of operational discipline. This type of leadership can be dangerously one-dimensional in its focus on practices and processes because it fails to recognize the human factor.

Fortunately, the skills underpinning authentic leadership can be taught, and when combined with targeted **coaching**, leaders can learn to inspire people as well as manage processes. It starts with identifying a purpose, communicating values (in other words, what is worth caring about) and earning trust through integrity. A culture of care and operational discipline are the natural results.

Operational Excellence Takes Care of Itself

One of the most successful coaches in American football, Bill Walsh, published a book entitled "The Score Takes Care of Itself". The title encapsulates a guiding principle that he followed to turn a losing team into winners. In essence, his philosophy was to shift the focus from the outcome (the score) to the input (attitudes, behaviours, skills). He proved that by concentrating on his players' performance, the score would take care of itself.

The same is true of organisations intent on achieving operational excellence. The most effective means of reaching that goal is to adjust the focus. With robust operational discipline supported by a culture of care, operational excellence takes care of itself.

DEKRA Organisational & Process Safety

DEKRA Organisational and Process Safety are a behavioural change and process safety consultancy company. Working in collaboration with our clients, our approach is to assess the process safety and influence the safety culture with the aim of 'making a difference'.

In terms of behavioural change, we deliver the skills, methods, and motivation to change leadership attitudes, behaviours and decision-making among employees; supporting our clients in creating a culture of care and measurable sustainable improvement of safety outcomes is our goal.

The breadth and depth of expertise in process safety makes us globally recognised specialists and trusted advisors. We help our clients to understand and evaluate their risks, and work together to develop pragmatic solutions. Our value-adding and practical approach integrates specialist process safety management, engineering and testing. We seek to educate and grow client competence to vide sustainable performance improvement; partnering with our clients we combine technical expertise with a passion for life preservation, harm reduction and asset protection.

We are a service unit of DEKRA SE, a global leader in safety since 1925 with over 45,000 employees in 60 countries and 5 continent. As a part of the world's leading expert organisation DEKRA, we are the global partner for a safe world.

We have offices throughout North America, Europe, and Asia.

For more information, visit www.dekra-uk.co.uk/en/dekra-organisational-and-process-safety/

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