

FOCUS ARTICLE

How to Improve your Safety Performance in Stagnant Situations

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In highly industrialised countries an interesting development has been seen that challenges many organisations: years of successfully focusing on improving health and safety conditions in the workplace resulted in a decrease of accident rates and sick leave. Leadership and subject matter experts were rewarded with their efforts with sometimes surprising results.

However, recently this development has stagnated, and further improvements have become difficult to recognise. This was visible through a plateau in the development of accident rates and sick leave and companies couldn't reduce them any further.

Companies are asking themselves how this stagnation arises and what can be done about it – or is it maybe an “underlying noise” which cannot be prevented? As many of the remaining accidents are easily attributed to “human error” or the behaviour of employees, it is suggested that organisations can do no more to minimise accident rates.

Often, someone to blame is found quickly and some typical measures are defined, such as: additional training, stricter controls, new procedures, new campaigns or disciplinary warnings. Usually, those measures don't have the desired effect. In fact, choosing those

measures show more of a symptom of the actual problem rather than them being a solution.

Companies often highly prioritise health and safety matters, and refer to them as significant in their specific workplace. However, reasons provided for this significance are not convincing to leaders and employees to do the right things. For example, many organisations focus on being compliant with legal obligations, management requirements, or simply demand for “zero accidents”. Of course, no organisation wishes to experience workplace accidents and the subsequent suffering, but the key drivers of prevention in reality often evolve around the desire of being compliant, ensuring conformity and quality.

We call such a corporate culture reactive or compliance driven. The activities and claims are not wrong or counterproductive, but there

will be no corporate culture in which safety and health are seen as added value. In a company with a well-developed culture, safety and health integrate into the organisation's DNA. We call these maturity levels of a corporate culture proactive or generative. Development is accompanied by a deep understanding of relationships, strong trust and the willingness to take responsibility for oneself and others.

One sample on how you can diagnose the maturity level of an organization is the way they deal with incidents: if incidents are used to identify the real root causes and lessons learned are communicated transparently, you may speak of a value added culture. If the focus is on finding who did something wrong, was responsible or the focus is on individuals, you can speak of a compliance driven culture.

It is important to accept that culture does not only affect safety. Also, quality, reliability, motivation and other factors are significantly influenced by the corporate culture. Generally, in our consulting projects, we witness better performance and results in companies with a mature corporate culture than in a less pronounced culture. These relationships should not be surprising, but in many cases they are not systematically addressed and thus development potentials are not fulfilled.

Just make a test: how did you feel last time you addressed a safety aspect in a positive, valuable way with one of your team members - did you feel appreciation and added value? Most likely both sides felt it was a good thing to talk about and that you care. This is a simple example of how to create added value.

The best results are achieved by companies that first gain insight into the actual leadership practices and observable behaviours and, based on this, specifically change understanding, behaviour, credibility and trust. Specific ways and measures have been known for years and are used successfully by leading companies. Therefore, if a company develops their organizational and leadership culture further in a systematic way, safety will improve, which will subsequently result in falling accident rates. When stagnant situations arise, this overarching approach will allow for more impactful improvements to be achieved.

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DEKRA Organisational Reliability

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