DEKRA

The Leader's Guide to Safety Improvement:

Four Lessons From Safety Assessments

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The Assessment Opportunity

The success of a change strategy depends on having the right information. In safety, an assessment typically provides the data used to plot the change course. Depending on the methodology used and the areas explored, the results of an assessment can sometimes be surprising. That has often been the case for us in our work with organizations across industry.

It is important to note that a safety assessment is not an end in itself, but an important tool for successful change. What might seem like an adequate assessment methodology (e.g., an audit of critical safety metrics) may not actually provide enough data to inform the change a leader is after. Substantial change in performance requires that we look beyond the obvious. We help leaders connect dots in safety and "non-safety" practices and systems (such as the influence on safety of performance management or organizational structure) with the goal of providing a more accurate map of how safety actually works — not just how people think it should.

This ebook shares some of the stories we have encountered as we support organizations in their journey of self-discovery and improvement planning. Presented as four lessons, the principles here can guide you wherever you are on your safety journey and help you plan your next move.

Lesson 1: Communicate clearly about safety — up, down, and across the organization

Conventional safety thinking has focused largely on what we call safety systems—mechanisms that directly seek to reduce or remove exposure to hazards in the workplace. Supply the right systems, the thinking goes, and results will follow. Studies and experience, however, have shown this vision to be flawed; for example, different sites with practically identical safety systems are known to report very different incident frequency rates, even when weighted for technology and work forces.

Assuring that systems are used as intended starts with communicating openly about what's really happening, and the barriers to reducing exposure.

The Road to Good Intentions

A few years ago, DEKRA consultant Rob Hoyle was helping one utility company assess their performance when he noticed something strange. Lineman were paying more attention to a company policy on the placement of orange cones around working utility trucks than they were on policies affecting their personal safety.

Hoyle asked one of the linesmen about his biggest safety concern. "Quite honestly," the lineman replied, "I'm afraid of getting into a (car) accident because I'll get fired.'"

What struck Hoyle was that this man, whose everyday job requires him to work at heights on high voltage lines, was more concerned about getting a scratch on his truck than being personally injured. Clearly, what had started out as a sensible policy for preventing vehicle mishaps took on the weight of a disciplinary issue that distracted from other, high-potential, exposures.

The Road to Good Intentions

Successful safety organizations cultivate good communication around safety systems, practices, and procedures. The goal is to assure alignment around what safety practices mean and to work together on removing barriers to exposure reduction. Here are a few ways you can start to build the connection between safety practices and safety outcomes:

- **Review your safety-enabling systems** — Look at the safety systems that have been put into place to help employees identify and control safety exposures and risks. Are these systems implemented and functioning as intended? Pay attention to perceptions around buy-in, quality, and effectiveness of these systems, as poor perceptions can impede the effectiveness of even good systems.

- **Engage employees in the safety process at the working interface** — What opportunities exist for your employees to be engaged and active in the safety process? Whether it's a behavior-based safety system or another initiative, make sure that there's a formal way for employees to have input on safety practices and decisions.

- **Develop the skills of your supervisors** — Often, when there's a breakdown in communication, it happens in the middle. Many supervisors who were tapped for their excellence at the work, are promoted without the training they really need to lead. Investing in your frontline leaders' ability to understand and manage safety will pay dividends in preventing miscommunication – and worse.

Lesson 2: Involve the right stakeholders in safety decision making and action

Whether you call it structure or governance, a strong formal framework that supports safety decision making, accountability, and action is a hallmark of organizations with strong safety performance. This structure is especially important when it comes time to achieve safety performance improvement. Structure matters to safety in particular because it connects the stated goals of the organization to execution. Structure is also an area that trips up many organizations before they even get started. Safety structure is far upstream of safety outcomes, which means that a flawed system for managing accountabilities and decision making can go undetected, sometimes for years.

Who Owns Safety?

DEKRA consultant Bill Bozzo was working with a drilling operator on a safety improvement strategy when he ran into strong headwinds from the company's leaders around governance. "We usually set up a safety leadership team to oversee the implementation. But no one at this company really liked it. It was like pulling teeth."
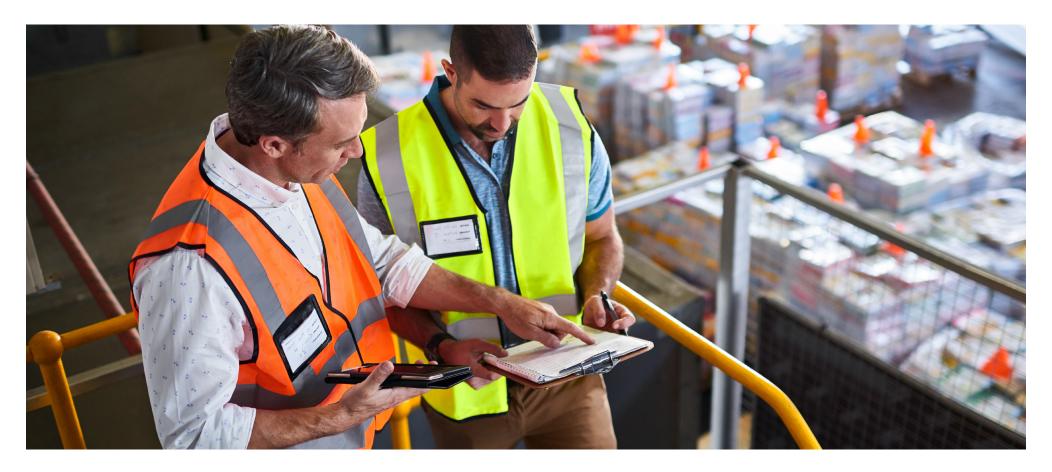
Further discovery showed that earlier safety programs at the company had been run out of corporate, giving safety the perception as something "top-down" — certainly not something to be owned by the employees and their leaders. After a few months, however, the senior-most safety executive had a lightbulb moment, telling Bozzo, "This is my opportunity to run safety as a collaborative effort rather than shoving all this stuff down everybody's throat.'"

Once the group came around, a team — and its results — formed quickly. The team was so successful they decided to also leverage them as the governance piece for safety in the whole organization.

Create the Right Safety Framework

Effective governance enables the organization and its leaders to influence safety in a very meaningful and powerful way. It can also create a strong personal connection between employees and the organization and its leaders—a connection pivotal to improving behavioral reliability in today's flatter, leaner organizations, where employees have more latitude and less oversight than ever before. The more inclusive a structure is of all the roles and levels that influence safety activities, the more effective the governance will be at driving consistent outcomes. Here are three ways you can begin building your safety "dream team":

- **Evaluate roles & responsibilities for safety** — Ask, what are our safety responsibilities by level? How effectively are our leaders seen in executing their safety activities and responsibilities? What mechanisms are in place for the ongoing development of safety knowledge and leadership? What safety leadership opportunities exist for workers?

- **Assure a strong governance structure exists for safety** — Look at the level and quality of sponsorship for safety. What is the primary focus of these safety governance groups? Do they have the authority and oversight of life-critical exposures and life-saving processes? Does leadership have ownership of these processes?

- **Equip leaders to succeed at every level** — Make sure that leaders in your organization understand, and can converse in, some core safety concepts such as the hierarchy of controls, James Reason's lines of defense, and root cause analysis, among others. Giving leaders a working knowledge of safety and how it works will help them connect the critical dots in everytday safety decision making and action.

Lesson 3: Cultivate a broad network of safety information

For many organizations, the problem is not that they don't have enough to measure, it's knowing how to process the various indicators that they do have, particularly if they are tracking a comprehensive mix of leading and lagging indicators. In organizations that focus on injuries and meeting certain numbers, safety metrics can become tainted by the emotional significance of certain indicators as they experience natural fluctuations. Leaders establish what is important by the things they monitor and measure. If only lagging indicators in safety are measured, then the organization focuses its attention there—after the fact.

Successful organizations tend to have a broad network of information that allows leaders to truly lead safety.

The Road to Good Intentions

Once, when working with a group of senior leaders, we set out a blank sheet of paper and asked them to describe the kind of data they'd need to ensure consistent safety improvement year after year. What would that data look like? How would they find it? The leaders mulled over the metrics they were used to: OSHA recordable rates, total case rates, lost workdays, and similar regulatory figures. Ultimately, the sheet remained blank.

Like other executives, these leaders genuinely cared about the wellbeing of their people. They were also highly accomplished in other areas. So why would they struggle so much with safety?

A large part of the answer lies with traditional safety thinking. Leaders have been trained to ask questions about lagging indicators. In many operations, "safety leadership" is more accurately described as management by exception—leaders respond to events, rather than anticipate and remove risks.

The result, says Bozzo, is that serious events can appear to "sneak up" on organizations. "You often hear leaders asking, 'How did that happen? There was no precursor. That was a fluke.' And what people don't recognize is that severe events are reflective. When you step back and start to look at potential, you see the possibility for these events was generally there all along."

Build a Better Game Plan

There are great examples of organizations that have built systems for understanding and responding to risk and that look for ways to extend exposure management beyond traditional safety boundaries. You can cultivate this kind of granularity in your own organization by focusing beyond injuries and looking to exposures. For leaders, strive to:

- **Understand data differently** — Stop asking about recordable rates and start asking about critical data that take into account potential upstream systemic incident causal factors, including management behaviors and decisions, risk assessment, facility design and construction, maintenance, management of change, management of contractors and requirements for incident investigation, analysis, and corrective action.

- **Have a strategy** — Be able to articulate safety expectations and performance levels five years down the road. Of course this includes goals and objectives. But critical here is to focus on the important inputs that contribute to strategy—employee feedback, observations, reporting of near misses and incidents, investigative findings, audit findings—rather than on delivering outputs such as OSHA recordables.

- **Focus on the big rocks** — Look at those things that create risk exposure to events that threaten lives or the viability of the operation. While unlikely or infrequent, make sure you're paying attention to events that could lead to significant loss of life, environmental damage, or property loss.

Lesson 4: Make safety a value, not just a priority

Safety improvement is about reducing exposure all the way up and down the organization. This means that for consistent improvement, safety can't be just a "priority" that can be upset by the next urgent business need. Safety must truly be a value.

Typically, "safety as priority" organizations are compliance-driven, that is, the focus is on meeting external standards of safety, which can change. In a values-driven organization the focus is on meeting our own standards of excellence. Safety is truly "how we do things here." Doing this well means developing a strong sense of what safety means to the organization and its role in our success.

Starting Strong

Hoyle recalls one leader who understood the importance of instilling safety as a value. The project was to do an assessment for a downstream oil & gas organization that had run into a plateau. While known for being a transformational organization, this deepwater drilling company had nevertheless been stalled for 36 months at 30-incidents or more per year.

Rather than a traditional improvement plan, the production VP asked Hoyle to conduct a "Safety Summit" for 300 offshore leaders–including supervisors, managers, general managers, and contractors. "She didn't want any PowerPoint. She wanted a behavior-based conference," says Hoyle.

For two-and-half days Hoyle and his colleagues listened to the leaders to understand what the issues were. Then they built solutions by using the expertise of the people who live and breathe this work every day. Says Hoyle, "We sustained that improvement through work the next year. And we were able to reduce their 30 incidents a year down below 14."

Finding Your Best Path

While the word "value" is frequently used to indicate what an organization aspires to, here we mean what the organization actually embodies. That is, worker wellbeing and health are recognized as having intrinsic worth, irrespective of their other benefits. Safety-related decisions, structure, and activities are oriented toward the pursuit of safety for its own sake. This is a tall order, but to start, leaders can focus on things they do every day:

- **Put Your Value for Safety into Action** — Think about who the heroes are in your organization. Who do you celebrate either formally or through performance management? Pay close attention to how people are recognized, rewarded, and promoted for safety. Make sure that there are clear expectations and policies that are enforced around safety as a criteria in performance and hiring decisions and contractor selection.

- **Stay close to day-to-day safety decision making** — Decisions influence an organization's safety culture. Consider: How you decide who is hired and trained for safety positions; how you define and implement safety processes; how you measure and communicate success; how you respond to barriers; even how much time you spend on the floor observing and engaging employees. These and similar decisions influence the extent to which safety is integrated with the business.

- **Educate yourself on the principles of effective safety leadership** — Be open to challenging your assumptions. Consider how you talk about safety. When discussing production, is the conversation about safe production? Do you talk about serious injuries and fatalities in terms of numbers, or by names of people? And ask yourself: Would you want your son or daughter to work an entry-level job in this company?

What's Next

Real safety performance improvement usually entails considerable change in an organization, both structurally and culturally. For most organizations, reaching this desired state requires alterations that might not be immediately evident. In this way, selecting the right assessment methodology canmake the difference between incremental improvement and true transformation.

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