



Secrets to Sustaining Safety Excellence

Why can certain organizations successfully sustain excellent safety performance when others cannot?

How do certain organizations reset from poor safety performance to a relentless drive towards “zero” injuries?

The answer: Good safety governance.

Achieving and sustaining safety success requires us to think strategically in order to discover what makes us vulnerable to injury — In other words, an organizational mindset of exposure recognition and control.

The mechanism for making this happen is a robust governance system. Governance systems enable us to step back and align our operational processes with a passion for people including a focus on their well-being. It also enables the use of analytics in order to see what is happening below the surface—to understand performance beyond

the “incident of the week.” Effective governance sets expectations of a disciplined, high-quality, safety-oriented execution of activities at every level of the organization. This also gifts leaders with opportunities to learn, to get better, and to drive towards excellent exposure control and ultimately the elusive “zero.”

Safety governance is the secret to sustaining safety excellence. It is the structure that makes the difference between performing a lot of uncoordinated safety tasks and performing critical safety activities focused on driving down exposure wherever it might exist.

Why does safety governance make a difference? Because when an organization is consumed with only random safety tasks, it sends a false message that safety improvement is always “just around the corner.” Random tasks, flavors of the month, and shiny objects are reactions to “what was” rather than driving “what could be.”

Without a strategic approach, sustained improvement is not around the corner. Injury performance only improves when exposure is reduced. Only safety activities focused on exposure reduction—including the particularly important serious injury and fatality exposure reduction—will broadly and systematically remove vulnerability to injury. The governing of safety not only facilitates a strategic and coordinated effort around exposure reduction activities, but it also aligns leaders at all levels—from front-line supervisors to the CEO—around organizational direction and philosophy.

Five Steps to Good Governance

Good governance brings stability. The ability to operate in control is not only needed to successfully control exposure, it is required for long-term sustainability. This is the real gift of good governance: it provides a structure that aligns the

organization around its values to facilitate decision-making. Because good governance is rooted in operations, it is aligned with the work to be done.

There are five steps to sustaining safety excellence at organizations through good governance. They are:

Get the governance structure right. The governance structure must support the function of governing not the other way around. To do just that, consider the following:

Get clear on the mission and vision for the organization.

Get clear on the best structure. Typically this includes an Executive Safety Council (ESC), Business Units (BU) and Local Safety Council (LSC).

Get clear on the decision-making process. This is often a mix of consensus and consultation.

Get clear on internal accountabilities. Operational leaders need to own and lead while safety professionals provide subject matter expertise, facilitating when necessary.

Get clear on external accountabilities. Each council need to discover and solve within their authority and raise up issues outside of their authority. Higher councils need to own responsibility for removing barriers to lower councils in implementing solutions.

Get clear on communications. The LSC will report achievements, learnings, and needs up to the BU that reports to the ESC. The LSC will report expectations and other learnings down and across lower tier councils.

Focus the coordinated agendas on the mission of sustainable exposure reduction across the business.

Get the right people. This step is critical. Safety is not sustainable unless it is operational. There is often the temptation to staff these councils with safety people. Please



resist. The objective is to integrate everything safety into the operational flow, including decision-making, aligning on policies, practices, and in the “path for work.” This means you must involve operational leaders who control the work.

Educate how governance functions. This includes defining what “good” performance looks like. We know the concept of governance is tricky and difficult for many of us to get our heads around. But what is most critical is that governing bodies understand their responsibility is to guard against bureaucracy that slows decision making, or the execution of agreed-upon actions. This is where governing often fails. Effective governance builds confidence and credibility in achieving results, opening doors to concerted solutions. It shows that leaders mean it when they say, “protecting people is a core value for our organization.”

Implement the process. Start with the ESC, then move to the BU councils and then the LSC. Where the governance system is complex, consider implementing a safety council oversight committee (perhaps just for startup) of key knowledgeable individuals to help form and align the various components. While all the councils are important, the focus is really on optimizing how the LSCs function. This is because exposure occurs where work occurs and where people intersect with hazards. The best way to control exposure is at the front line; the LSC, therefore, provides a mechanism for the line to own and control those exposures. Councils, therefore, are best designed with leaders at multiple levels who bring different points of view and experience in enabling line workers to drive best the solutions.

High-functioning governance councils practice a cascading process that promotes information and feedback moving from the ESC to the LSC and back up to the ESC. Information, innovation, and feedback must be shared laterally across BUs and LSCs. Establishing these connections and expectations is a deliberative and systemic process – not something to be left to individual councils to figure out. Remember, we are building a model of organizational collaboration around safety and governance is the framework that enables that to happen.

Practice. Select a governance sponsor who can monitor and drive discipline through the structure to promote following meeting schedules and agendas, and who can foster communication across the safety governing bodies.

Onboard leadership teams on their roles and responsibilities. Inform them of the structure and intent, as well as tools and resources at their disposal. Similarly, onboard council members as to their roles and how they can best contribute to creating successful outcomes.

Fresh perspectives are important. Establish a transparent succession model of council leadership that allows for development and mentoring and for unexpected change. Similarly, consider terms and duration, and management of turnover for council members.

Determine and seek the necessary data for the council to best affect exposure. These may be leading indicators around performance of exposure controls not previously gathered. Obtaining good actionable data may require a change in how data is collected.

Set a cadence of recurring meetings at a time best suited for participation. Don't let individual conflicts derail the cadence – establish alternate leaders to step in as needed. And as a new council begins to function, be prepared to meet longer and more often should a critical need arise.

Benefits of Good Governance

So what does all this effort really get you? Many organizations have discovered that aside from the obvious benefits of formalizing how safety is governed, safety governance yields many unexpected and, yes, awesome results. We can divide the results as both cultural and practical:

Cultural Benefits

Deploys the organization's vision.

Facilitates an expectation of discovery and the resolution of exposure.

Demonstrates organizational values.

Establishes safety as a critical business system, supporting “operating in control.”

Places protection of people as a cardinal virtue.

Distinguishes an ethos of transparency and accountability, and commitments promised and delivered.

Builds organizational confidence and credibility.

Creates passion, engagement and ownership of frontline employees in embracing their essential role in exposure identification and control

Practical Benefits

Establishes a structure for coordinated implementation when making changes to both policies and practices.

Accentuates broad accountability which ensures fairness with resolution of underlying causes and contributors.

Facilitates a coordinated approach to needed and actionable metrics.

Enables improved management of resources by providing a mechanism to prioritize spending and understand its impact on exposure reduction.

Establishes a viable structure that is sustainable through organizational adjustments (leadership changes, negotiating a new labor contract, installing a new process) and crises (Covid-19, natural disasters, bankruptcy).

Establishes the practice “controlling exposure for self and others” by frontline workers as “the way that we do work.”

Ensures a strategic approach to safety development efforts to strengthen culture and build skills to control exposure.

Conclusion

Avenues for injury are varied and complex, and ever present. Recognizing and controlling these exposures is the first step in reducing the vulnerability of your workers to injury. But like any other critical business system, exposure management requires careful attention, disciplined application, and a measure of both short- and long-term commitment.

Properly structured governance systems provide the framework for an organization to recognize and control exposures. When safety governance functions at a higher level, it leads to safety excellence.

The common thread of organizations that successfully deliver safety excellence year over year, is the relentless focus by leadership and workers at all levels in recognizing and controlling exposure. This ethos evolves from embracing mature, high-functioning governance systems.

Learn More Interested in learning more about how you can structure an effective governance system in your organization?

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