



Employ a Laser-Like Focus to Achieve Safety Success

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Managing Safety

What's the difference between the lights in a parking lot and the light of a laser? Parking lot lights illuminate large areas, providing just enough light to find your car, without casting so much as to disrupt a neighboring home or business. In contrast, the light of a laser is so intense that it can slice through steel or be used in intricate surgical applications.

Today we find ourselves managing highly integrated and often complex organizational processes. You may have heard this referred to as "big picture management." Whether we manage production, quality, procurement or the safety function, it's imperative that each functional management area understand the organization's mission to deploy laser-focused actions that contribute to success. A "big picture" approach alone is insufficient. Success can only be truly achieved when "big picture" and laser-focused visions are combined to achieve synergistic results.

Several years ago, I was working with a group of other safety professionals to develop a new safety vision for the corporation. In all honesty, I wasn't sure I wanted to be part of the discussion after I failed to move the group past what I felt was a short-sighted vision statement adopted by the team. The statement read something like: "As a company, we are to promote and support occupational safety and to manage in a manner that seeks to eliminate occupational injuries and illnesses." While it might have looked nice on paper it came up short in terms of our actual mission – namely to protect our people, processes and products. If our safety mission was to stop loss, why didn't we just say so?

When it comes to improving safety in the workplace, the first question to ask yourself is: What is your laser-focused vision for safety success and are you experiencing a level of success that truly supports this vision? Next consider whether or not employees actively are implementing this vision on a daily basis. Political commentator Richard Brookhiser once said during Ronald Reagan's presidential tenure: "Reaganism could be jotted down on the back of a business card." It was simply, "defeat communism and cut taxes." What didn't fit on the back of a business card, Brookhiser said, could safely be ignored.

If you can't articulate your vision, you won't be able to communicate it to others or motivate people to achieve defined goals. Your vision statement must communicate both the purpose and values of your organization. It should also be clear, concise and geared toward success, while inspiring employees to deliver their best and safest work. It is also worth noting that the vision statement can also help shape external perceptions of your organization.

So what is your vision for safety success? For too many organizations it's focused on reducing or mitigating loss. Does this kind of safety vision engage or excite you? If not, how can it possibly excite those who are expected to demonstrate these behaviors on a daily basis?

Would someone who looked at your vision statement quickly recognize your safety values and how safety factors into your organization? A laser-focused safety vision can be a powerful tool for engaging employees, elevating expectations and driving a sense of ownership that takes people out of their comfort zones. Consider the following for developing a laser-focused safety vision for your organization:

Seek multiple perspectives. Assess your organization from top to bottom and inside out. Ask employees what motivates and inspires their commitment to safety and if the current safety vision aligns with their

perspectives. Gather external feedback and don't be discouraged if comments from the manufacturing floor do not align with comments from the front office.

Look for natural safety champions in your organization and assemble a “vision team.” It's crucial to take the time to assemble a team of dedicated personnel from all levels of the organization who share your passion for and dedication to safety.

Review your organization's safety goals and objectives before crafting the safety vision. Without a clear understanding of what you hope to achieve, it's impossible to realize your safety objectives. Document these goals and ensure that all members of the safety team have ownership and commitment to achieving them.

Once you have reviewed your goals and objectives, start working on a laser-focused safety vision for your organization. Your vision statement should be brief and to-the-point. If it is more than one or two sentences, you will struggle to communicate its purpose and value. A single phrase or sentence works best. Remember, the true measure of success is to create a safety vision that is compelling and memorable. If employees can't remember it, they will be less likely to help you realize it.

After completing the safety vision statement, test it in draft form with employees, friends and colleagues outside your organization. Remember, if the statement doesn't inspire, it is not going to work. By sharing drafts, you'll work toward gathering support for your vision. Don't discount the value of stakeholder buy-in, which extends the reach of the safety process and helps build advocacy within your organization.

Endorsement is a critical step in this process and should not be taken lightly. Since your laser-focused safety vision statement is a values-based statement, endorsement from others is crucial. It is the stamp of approval that signifies the collective agreement that will help you realize the vision. Many great visions have failed because of poor endorsement practices. If done right, however, you can move past a work force of safety advocates to a work force of safety ambassadors who sponsor and implement the vision.

Finally, communicate your laser-focused safety vision broadly throughout the organization. If you have a safety Web site, post the vision there and consider it the first conversation in an ongoing dialogue. Keep the focus on safety by including relevant content and success stories in a wide variety of employee communications. Consider beginning team meetings by restating your laser-focused safety vision. The key is to be creative and to ensure that your safety vision is always top-of-mind in your organization.

In closing, I'm reminded of a quote from the late Yogi Berra, who said: “You've got to be careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there.”

Frankly, Yogi hit it out of the park with that simple statement. In occupational safety, I've watched too many peers work off of a to-do list rather than truly embrace and lead safety in their organizations. While I'm certain there are reasons for working this way, the reality is that it's impossible to “luck” your way into safety success.

Without a laser-focused safety vision and a core list of goals and objectives, safety success will be at best limited and very likely not sustainable. As leaders, our jobs are to not only be technically proficient, but to inspire, energize and motivate others to achieve success. As safety leaders, our chief responsibilities are to aggressively pursue a vision for safety that leads to the best possible outcomes – the safety and well-being of our employees.

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