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The Top 10 Mistakes Managers Make Managing Safety Performance – Mistake #2

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“It’s business – not personal.”

— *Joe Fox*

Biggest Mistake Number 2: Thinking Safety Performance is Just Like Every Other Business Goal

Read the mission, vision and values statement of just about any industrial company these days, and you’re bound to find safety prominently mentioned. Words to the effect that “The safety of our stakeholders is of critical importance to the success of our business” can be found right next to the other goals and values so important in any industrial enterprise: to be productive, cost-conscious, customer-focused, and highly ethical.

Having once authored a “plant safety philosophy” a couple of decades back, we’re the first to say that there’s nothing fundamentally wrong with this approach. After all, the role of top management is to set policy - establish long-term direction - put the processes and culture in place to achieve the mission.

Moreover, as middle managers, we’ve spent plenty of time living on the receiving end of these policy directives. In every organization, it falls to middle managers to translate the direction from the top into action and results. Today, it’s known as “alignment.”

Back in our days as managers, “cascading” was the popular term used to describe the process of passing the message down from the top. Cascading was so commonplace that most of us in the middle felt like our offices were located at the base of a waterfall.

Setting Our Priorities

Time is always the most precious asset any manager has. Every day, every manager has to

decide how to allocate that asset among all the activities demanding our attention. In theory, the mission statement was designed to simplify that process, shortening up the range of choices. Most of the time, the statement simply reinforced what we already knew: everything was important. Get it all done.

Managing safety performance fit in with everything else important we knew had to get done: make the product, get the cost down; satisfy customer, and keep the people working for us reasonable happy; all part of running the business well.

We didn't dare drop anything. Except, we really did drop some things all the time. Forced to set priorities, the squeaking wheel always got our attention: the problem of the day, or the flavor of the month - what our management was paying closest attention to - this time. In the case of managing safety performance, the amount of pressure we got from the top was normally a function of performance. When performance was really good, we could expect to be left alone. When things changed for the worse, we could expect a full blitz.

That's the pressure from the top. But every manager plays to two audiences: above and below.

From those who we managed, we knew to expect the reverse: whether performance was good or bad, seldom did anyone beg for more and better safety. It was pretty common to find our latest "safety improvement initiative" greeted with skepticism - or outright resistance. "Leave me alone, and just let me do my job" summed up the sentiment of many.

For those of use living in the middle, this was a very strange and confusing reality: top management pressuring us to improve safety as part of running the business; the people we manage telling us how safe they worked was none of our business.

It begged a question that very few of us ever asked: "Are safety goals just like all our other business goals?" But, most of us were just too busy to take the time to think about the question, let alone the answer.

We went about managing safety performance as if it weren't any different. As Joe Fox explains to his competitor in *You've Got Mail*, when he's running her out of business: "It's business - not personal."

The Moment of Truth

Every once in a great while, the unfortunate among us got to face something that nobody ever prepares for as a manager: meeting the family of a seriously injured employee at the emergency room of the hospital.

From personal experience, we can tell you what a sobering moment that is. We got to witness, in living color, all the really important things in someone else's life: their family and friends; their values; their interests and passion in life.

Guess what: for them, what's important was never about their job.

We were often asked troubling questions: "How did this happen?" or, worse, "How could you let this happen?"

(We suspect those kinds of questions got many outfits to take the position that meeting the employee family members was the duty of the Human Resources staff. On our team, we always took the position that we'd be there to face the family.)

On the drive home from the hospital, we'd think about what a serious injury to us would do to all the things most important in our lives. Even if you're the most upwardly oriented manager in the world, with sights trained on the corporate suite, you realize that your job isn't the defining part of your life. There have been more than a few of us whose work life was never quite the same after that experience.

Business or Personal?

Is the goal of sending people home safe at the end of the day just like every other important goal the enterprise has? Is safety "business or personal?"

As individuals, we know it's personal for us.

You can bet that it is equally personal for anyone working for us. Lose a customer, close a business, lose your job, life goes on. (We can personally attest to that.) Suffer a life-altering injury, and life doesn't go on - at least not the way anyone is used to living it.

Fortunately, most managers go through their tenure in office without having to endure this experience. That's one of the many benefits from having great safety performance. Count yourself among the lucky majority if you haven't had this experience.

Of course, the danger hidden in great safety performance is that it tempts us to take our foot off the gas - so we can spend our precious time on those other business goals that are so important to the business.

If you spend just a few minutes thinking about what a serious injury can do to people's lives - yours, those working for you, and everyone's families - you'll appreciate that safety isn't anything like any other business objective.

Once you realize that, your approach to managing safety changes forever. You never again need top management to tell us that safety is important to make it so. You can handle the resistance to your efforts to manage safety performance that naturally comes with the territory. You appreciate what's really at stake.

Unfortunately, all too many of us managers took safety seriously when it became important to our management because it was important to our management. We didn't always push safety as hard as we should have because dealing with resistance was seldom pleasant.

It was a mistake. One of the biggest mistakes a manager can make.

Worse, when you find out you've made it, it's usually too late!



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