The Challenge of Vision

What makes executives effective safety leaders? In our experience, we have found that certain management and leadership practices recur across those organizations that have outstanding safety performance. Effective leaders have high levels of credibility, accountability, and communication; they are action-oriented and have a clear vision of how a high-performance culture works. They demonstrate high levels of feedback and recognition, and collaboration. These practices, while simple in concept, can be difficult to apply consistently and well. One of the practices that leaders frequently struggle with is vision. Understanding the importance of vision and how leadership can use it to foster an organizational climate in which strong safety performance thrives is a critical leadership skill and opportunity.

Why Vision Matters
In every organization, outcomes begin with a leader articulating a vision. Vision is what tells a company where it will be in the future and how it is going to get there. A good safety vision tells us why safety is important and determines the kind of time and resources we put into it—and consequently the kind of results we get out of it. Vision also fosters alignment. It gives people in the organization something to rally around. Successful safety visionaries are able to see and communicate the integral role of safety in achieving corporate or plant objectives, and what role safety has on the bottom line.

Still, for many leaders formulating and articulating a vision for safety performance is an ongoing challenge. One reason for this is that people are unaccustomed to thinking of safety in strategic terms. For many people, safety is just another maintenance activity, not a lever for building a high performance culture, community relations, competitive advantage, or creating bottom-line growth. Leaders don’t often see a close connection between safety and the things that most people recognize as strategic goals, such as new product development, acquisitions or increasing market share.

The reality, however, is that good safety is good business. Many companies are discovering that safety done well has broad implications for the well-being of the whole organization. In addition to being linked directly to cultural improvements such as improved awareness and conditions, safety is also a performance leader. Compared to other areas of group performance improvement, safety has an immediate value for all levels throughout the organization and enjoys the benefit of a nationally recognized standard of measurement. When driven by a sound strategy, safety can become a catalyst for improvement in other performance areas and provide leverage in improving culture, company image, and the bottom line.

How to Create an Effective Safety Vision
Leaders who do safety vision well are able to see what safety looks like in the organization and communicate that in a compelling way. Good safety visions are strategic, engaging, and far-reaching.

Strategic • First, the leader needs to be able to perceive the role safety plays in achieving organizational objectives. A good safety vision doesn’t just tie safety to strategic objectives, it shows us how safety is integral to them. Without a clear understanding of that, safety as a vision is reduced to platitudes; a wonderful thing that no one can argue against, but nothing that is part of the business or its future. To define a strategic safety vision, the leader needs to ask: What does safety really mean to the organization? Where does it fit in the scheme of other objectives and initiatives? What does it mean to our place in the market and the bottom line?

Engaging • Once a strategic vision has been defined, leaders need to align themselves to the vision. This means confronting the sometimes difficult questions about how they will act in the difficult situations where there appear to be trade-offs between what their vision demands and some short-term or local gain. They then need to be able to share the vision in an engaging and effective way and rally others around it. Practically speaking, this means getting their vision across to other members of the organization through actions as well as words. Leaders can do this by demonstrating a willingness to consider and accept new ideas and helping people to realize the impact of their actions on the safety of others. Additionally, they need to challenge and inspire people around the safety vision and values, and describe a compelling picture of what the future could look like when safety is fully realized.

Far-reaching • Finally, an effective safety vision is far-reaching; it informs how we approach doing day-to-day business and considers how what we do impacts other parts of the organization. Among the most common errors we see leaders make is overlooking opportunities to think about the role of safety strategically in their day-to-day work or to communicate those opportunities to others. For example, if I’m a vice president in purchasing, I may already ensure the safety of my own people. But do I have a clear understanding of how safety performance fits into our strategic plan and how my department has to contribute to that? Do I consider the safety vision when making purchasing decisions or policy?

Creating Stronger Leadership
As mentioned earlier, vision is just one of several practices that effective safety leaders use to drive outstanding performance. Leaders who can define a compelling vision of safety as a critical function of business success and engage others in acting on that vision, are well on their way to becoming strong safety leaders.