

Why don't people change?

Understanding what keeps good people from engaging in good safety efforts

Imagine that you're the safety manager at a large and successful company. You've just found a new initiative that will revolutionize your organization's safety performance. This initiative represents a significant advancement over your current efforts and has a proven track record for reducing injuries and workers compensation costs. You train everyone how to use this new initiative, and kick things off with great fanfare. Yet, six months down the road the initiative is struggling just to survive. The initiative's activities are all but stopped, intended results are nowhere to be seen, and the people who seemed so enthusiastic a few short months ago now seem ambivalent, or worse, cynical. So, what happened—and what do you do next?

In my experience working with hundreds of companies striving for a step-change in safety performance, scenarios such as this are all too common. Many of these organizations have tried a variety of strategies, approaches, and initiatives in order to bring about improvement, only to find that enthusiasm doesn't always translate into actions. People who seem to genuinely care about safety aren't engaged by the new initiative, oftentimes performing the same way they always did. Even sites that have achieved some success can be haunted by a lack of engagement. They may experience a lingering lack of trust between hourly and management employees, struggles to maintain safety activities, or a long plateau after significant injury reduction. Whatever the reason, I hear these organizations ask, *why don't people change?*

This paradoxical situation, where line employees (or supervisors or managers) who care about safety yet "don't do what we need them to", is one of the most perplexing in

safety management today. Instead of assigning blame, however, it is helpful to examine the underlying reasons behind this inconsistency. This article outlines common symptoms of organizations experiencing "lack of change", the reasons behind this struggle, and practical steps toward building a high-performing organization.

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Why People Aren't Changing

It's hard to understand why people wouldn't automatically take the steps necessary to implement a good safety strategy. After all, no one wants to get hurt. Yet it turns out that a good strategy is only part of the battle. When organizations struggle to implement change it is often because they have built-in cultural

roadblocks to the success of the safety initiative. The culture, or "the way we do things around here" can be such that employees are actually discouraged from participating in new safety initiatives. These roadblocks are often so ingrained that many otherwise savvy safety professionals don't recognize them, leading to a cycle of wasted resources, missed opportunities, and frustration.

The Revolving Door • I once visited a site where all the company vehicles had detachable signs on the door. This seemed odd for such a large company. So when I asked why this was, I was surprised to hear that they had no intention of making permanent signs. "Why go to the trouble," said one employee, "When they're just going to change the name again anyway?" It turned out that the site had recently been through several



David Darbone
BST Senior Consultant

David Darbone with Rebecca Nigel

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ownership changes in a short period of time and employees were hesitant to commit to anything until they were sure the change was going to last.

The same thing happens in organizations with a high turnover in safety initiatives. Employees learn that it's better to just "go through the motions" rather than invest themselves in an effort that soon will be abandoned for something else. Also known as "flavor of the month", the revolving door effect can go on for years, generating a sense of impermanence around safety activities, and cynicism about the organization's commitment to safety and its ability to solve problems. As a result, leadership will find that it increasingly struggles to generate buy-in for new initiatives, and more fundamentally, the commitment to the organization's values as a whole.

Carrying Around More Than a Tool Box • In addition to the revolving door effect, organizations can experience another type of negative cultural activity known as "employee baggage". Employee baggage can be any one of a set of negative paradigms that good employees acquire through years of bad work experiences.

Employee baggage can occur at any level of an organization. At one site I worked with, a senior executive came from corporate to address the managers on safety performance with the intention of demonstrating his full support to this group. Instead of acknowledging the group's current efforts however, the senior leader introduced himself as the plant manager's boss (he never gave his own name) and outlined a broad vision of safety outcomes without specific ideas or support. Before leaving (early), the executive made sure the group understood he had shut down plants for lack of adequate performance. Although the senior executive had great intentions he obviously did not accomplish what he intended; instead, he actually reinforced the management team's perceptions that corporate was heavy-handed and lacked practical leadership. Sadly, no one in the organization felt comfortable giving him feedback.

Negative experiences that contribute to employee baggage don't have to be major events. They can be as simple as being passed over for promotion, seeing production needs take precedence over a safety concern, or failure on the part of a manager to follow through on a promise for help. While every organization experiences occasional lapses in fairness or consistency, prolonged or repeated lapses lead employees to form beliefs that the organization does not care about them, doesn't treat them fairly, or even that certain levels in the organization are not credible. This makes generating the commitment needed for a new change effort very hard, if not impossible, to do.

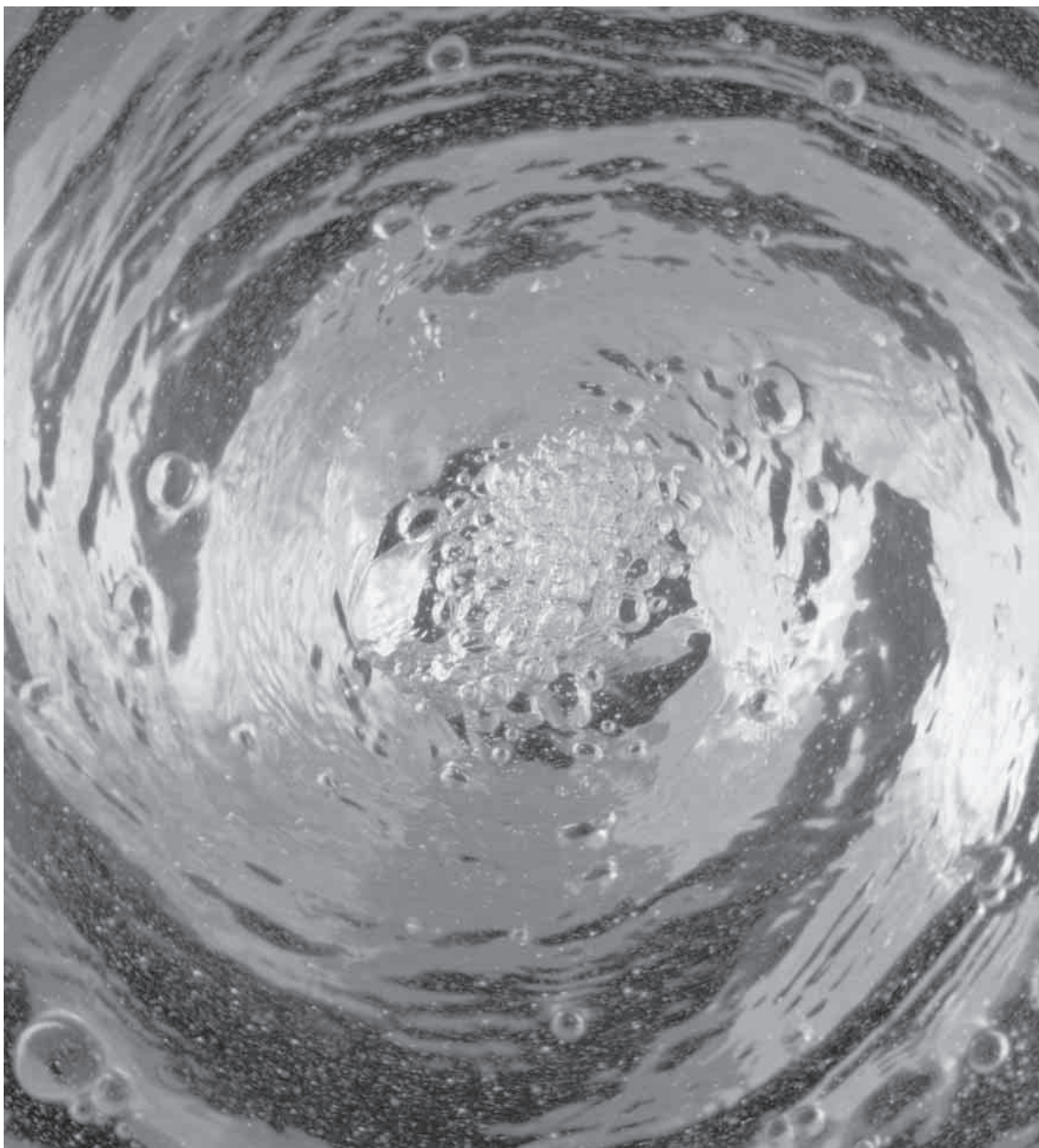
Sending the Wrong Message • Even without the drag effects of revolving door safety initiatives or employee baggage, many organizational leaders are frustrated in their attempts to communicate organization objectives and priorities. In one company I worked with, the plant manager indicated to me that for some reason there seemed to be a lack of trust in his organization. This leader had recently implemented a new "zero tolerance" safety policy he had learned about from another site. The goal of the policy was admirable: the plant manager sought to create an organization where safety was the deciding factor on how work was performed. However, as I talked to other people in the organization, it became clear that the plant manager's vision meant different things at different levels.

It turns out that as the initiative was communicated from managers to supervisors, the initiative went from "Let's not trade safety for production" to "We won't settle for anything that doesn't follow the safety rules". By the time the message was communicated from supervisors to front-line employees the message had become "We're not going to stand for any safety violations"—a message with a drastically different connotation than the original, and, for line employees in particular, one with alarming implications. As one employee confided in me, "If we can't trust them with safety, what can we trust them with?"

Communicating about safety objectives, activities, and events is critical to the health of a new safety initiative. But when the communication is not consistent with subsequent activities, is misrepresented as it goes through different levels, or doesn't go both ways, communication can work against a new safety initiative. People at different levels may perceive that the information isn't reliable or that it is evidence that the organization does not care about them. The result is that employees are discouraged from investing themselves in the new change effort.

Under-Equipping Key Players • Finally, many organizations inadvertently handicap themselves by not providing the resources that employees need to change their behaviors and engage in the new initiative. One of the most common examples is seen at the supervisory/middle management level. In many organizations, supervisors are promoted because they are excellent workers, not necessarily because they have demonstrated management skills. So when a new initiative comes along, they may not know how to support it in a way that is constructive or sustainable on a daily basis. Without guidance or training, even well-intentioned supervisors may fail to fulfill their role in the new initiative and, worse, may be reluctant even to admit that they don't have the skills to do their job.

New safety initiatives require people to change how



they approach safety tasks and even how they approach their regular job duties. When people lack the tools or skills needed to integrate these new tasks, they are less likely to view the initiative positively. And when people feel that the burden has been put on them alone to make the new initiative succeed, they are likely to question the level of the organization's commitment to safety.

The Role of Organizational Functioning

Introducing any performance initiative into an organization is like tossing a pebble into a pond. A steering team's activities generate a series of ripples that engage the energy of others throughout the organization. In the case of behavior-based safety, the ripples flow out horizontally through observations, and vertically through data use.

Successful organizations achieve ripples that flow effectively and efficiently, creating rapid improvement and wide acceptance. In organizations that struggle, the pond is more like a pool of molasses; the ripples are slow moving and quick to lose momentum, bogged down by built-in organizational barriers such as mistrust between levels or poor communication. Still others experience a ripple effect like dropping a pebble into a turbulent ocean. The initiative's activities are quickly swallowed up in a sea of competing priorities and conflicting messages.

When a change initiative requires people to take on new responsibilities, learn new skills, and integrate new tasks into their existing day-to-day activities, success depends on having the "smooth pond" of a high-performing culture. A body of research identifies nine characteristics



indicative of high-performing organizations and predictive of successful safety outcomes. These are:

- 1) Teamwork—*the effectiveness of workgroups in meeting targets and deadlines*
- 2) Workgroup relations—*the degree to which coworkers respect each other*
- 3) Procedural justice—*the level that workers rate the fairness of first-level supervisors*
- 4) Perceived organizational support—*the level to which employees feel the organization is concerned for their overall well-being*
- 5) Leader-member exchange—*the strength of relationship that workers feel they have with their supervisors*
- 6) Management credibility—*the perception of consistency and fairness of management in dealing with workers*
- 7) Organizational value for safety—*the perceived level of the organization's commitment to safety*
- 8) Upward communication—*the adequacy of upward messages about safety*
- 9) Approaching others—*the probability that workers will speak to each other about performance issues*

It's easy to see why organizations with low levels of these nine characteristics would struggle to generate momentum for a new safety change initiative. Line employees may readily see unsafe practices but not feel comfortable discussing them with their coworkers. Supervisors may want to provide support to ongoing safety activities, but may

perceive that productivity is more highly valued by their managers. Even senior managers and leaders may want to improve how they provide support for safety initiatives, but may be hampered by scant information about performance on the floor. As organizations work to build the nine characteristics of high performance into their culture they significantly improve their chances of success with new performance initiatives, and with getting people to do “what we need them to”.

Getting People to Change: The Umbrella Approach

Moving a new safety initiative beyond cultural roadblocks takes an approach that targets every level of the organization. This comprehensive, or “umbrella” approach ensures that everyone has the tools needed to participate in long-term success.

Defining the Culture You Want to Create • The first step to improvement is to develop an accurate picture of how your organization is functioning *right now*. New tools allow companies to measure the level of performance characteristics accurately enough to develop a specific improvement strategy. Using this assessment as a blueprint, the next step is to define your desired culture in terms that are measurable and attainable. Successful organizations start with broad goals and break them down into specific terms. In the case of management credibility, for instance, that might be defining a culture where managers consistently follow through on commitments, where supervisors demonstrate fairness in personnel decisions, and where managers hold themselves to the same standards and expectations as their reports.



Senior Leaders & Managers • Research shows that one of the most critical factors in the success of safety efforts is leadership. Through what they choose to focus on and how they go about doing the things they do, leaders telegraph what is really important to the organization. Typically not engaged in on-the-floor safety activities or action plans, senior leaders can still set the stage for safety success by fostering a healthy organizational culture. Using the improvement blueprint as a model, site managers can develop personal action plans that target specific activities in their sphere of influence, such as communication of work priorities, providing adequate resources for removing the barriers to safety performance, and setting expectations for day-to-day activities. Many leaders and managers are using leadership coaching to help them leverage their actions for optimum effect throughout the organization.

Supervisors & Team Leaders • Supervisors have the most influence over day-to-day activities that affect performance outcomes. While some sites do allow supervisors to participate in employee-driven safety initiatives, such as by conducting observations, most have supervisors take a supporting role. Supervisors smooth the way for new safety initiatives by providing work coverage so employees can participate in the initiative's activities, engaging in problem solving with their reports around safety issues, and integrating safety priorities with production needs. Organizations can facilitate this by providing positive reinforcement for safety activities and through training in performance management skills to help supervisors and team leaders work more effectively with employees in meeting overall safety objectives.

Engaging Front-Line Employees • Line employees are at the heart of the working interface, where what people do meets systems and equipment. In order to get front-line employees to participate in new safety initiatives, organizations need to provide mechanisms that allow for meaningful involvement. A well-structured behavior-based safety process can do this by engaging front line employees in capturing data on the working interface and using that data to remove the barriers in systems and equipment to safe performance. To help reinforce their skills, organizations make sure that key individuals have adequate training for their role. This training typically includes interaction skills and safety system principles for observers, and more specific time management and organization skills for team facilitators.

Conclusion

Safety success relies on more than a good strategy; it requires a receptive organizational culture. High-performance characteristics such as trust, communication, and teamwork create a culture where important change strategies are readily integrated with daily activities, and important organizational objectives more readily achieved. By adapting an umbrella approach that engages every level of the organization with the appropriate tools and resources, organizations get everyone pulling on the same rope in the same direction toward an injury-free culture.

