

INTEGRATED SAFETY FILTERS

By David G. Lynn

One of the biggest challenges in the safety world is that company leaders treat safety as an activity separate from the actual work task. Leaders fail to realize that safety is a measure of work efficiency that requires problem-solving filters that are integrated into every individual's choice.

To achieve safety success, filter decisions through an organizational safety framework, frontline leadership engagement and individual ownership of critical decisions. Each of these filters has the opportunity to steer an employee's judgment in a direction that prevents mistakes that lead to incidents. Let's explore what that means from a practical perspective.

Organizational Safety Framework

Structure promotes consistency and builds confidence in workers because they know the company's expectations. Find a way to instill fundamental safety principles into the organization's safety framework but keep in mind that principles are only half the story. Leaders must know how they will tactically put these principles into practice. Just like in organized sports, teams must have a game plan and strategy that puts a principle into practice. The strategic safety framework should include several elements: management commitment and visibility, employee involvement, work site analysis, training and communication, and prevention and controls.

A safety framework (management system) defines goals, objectives, controls and expectations. Companies with structure and discipline in their safety cultures can influence safe decisions in a dynamic work environment with their safety framework. In essence, a structured, disciplined safety program creates a culture with clear expectations for managers and employees. What does a structured, disciplined program look like? Successful safety cultures find a way to put fundamental safety principles into practice (Lynn, 2020).

Frontline Leadership Engagement

Ask this simple question about leadership style: Are frontline leaders more likely to manage safety from behind a computer or will they ask employees questions face-to-face in the work environment? Consider which approach is more effective. The most influential and cost-effective safety tool a leader has is a conversation with an employee. This is important because employees are not the problem. They are the problem-solvers, and frontline leaders should engage employees to solve problems.

When frontline leaders ask employees questions about their work, they learn about the challenges that workers face. Frontline leaders gain real-time understanding. They share expectations and break down obstacles. Frontline leaders help drive improvement with conversations.

Leaders can start the engagement process with a PEAK safety dialogue.

- P: Plan critical steps. (What are the critical steps for this task today?)
- E: Evaluate risk. (What is the worst thing that can happen?)
- A: Anticipate errors. (If an employee made a mistake, what would it be?)
- K: Know prevention controls. (How do employees perform this task without getting hurt?)

The process develops habits that encourage leaders to approach people about safety. The systematic questions about steps, errors, consequences and controls lead to a better understanding of employees' processes. The insight builds a stronger safety culture with more situational awareness. The PEAK safety dialogue process is an example of how injury prevention can begin with a conversation.

Frontline leaders do not have all the answers. Think about what frontline leaders can learn if they ask these questions every day. Frontline leadership engagement with the support of a strong safety framework will influence decisions and drive safety improvement.

Individual Ownership

Individual ownership starts when employees see their personal need for safety and when they show a genuine concern for coworkers. Employees can begin to see a need for safety if they ask simple questions such as "What if?" Acknowledge that mistakes and injuries can happen to any employee. This realization will help guide and influence employee decisions.

The what-if mindset embraces the personal responsibility to avoid mistakes that lead to injuries. There is a tremen-

dous benefit to cultivating a positive culture in which every employee considers the risk of each task and promotes the expectation to approach others who may be at risk. Employees must reinforce safety principles that leaders promote with their personal actions. What if employees look for hazards and take ownership of correcting them? If employees ask the following questions before each task, they will begin to build individual ownership:

- What could go wrong?
- How bad could it be?
- Has anything changed?
- Am I physically ready?
- Am I mentally ready?
- Do I understand my task?
- Do I have the right tools?
- Do I have the right equipment?

Each question takes an employee one step closer to a good individual decision. Individual last-minute risk assessments are the final line of defense. An organization's safety framework enables a safety culture. Frontline leaders support the culture with their personal engagement and individuals execute the work with sound judgment, concern for others and personal ownership.

Conclusion

The bottom line: work is dynamic. Employees make thousands of decisions every day that have the potential to impact safety. Company leaders and employees cannot predict every variation of choice, but they can control how they make decisions with filters that are integrated into the work they perform. That is why leaders must ensure that they have a robust organizational safety framework, frontline leadership engagement and individual ownership of employee actions. These are the keys to success with safety. **PSJ**

References

Lynn, D.G. (2020). *Principle to practice: Follow the blue line*. Peak Safety Performance.

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