



SAFETY FIRST

Hazards are ever-present in the steel plant environment, and a heightened awareness and emphasis on safety is a necessary priority for our industry. This monthly column, written by members of the AIST Safety and Health Technology Committee, focuses on procedures and practices to promote a safe working environment for everyone.

Safety Leadership and the Injury-Free Culture: Eight Questions Every Leader Needs to Ask and Answer

Practically speaking, an injury-free culture doesn't mean "zero injuries"; it means creating an environment where injuries are not acceptable and where we do everything possible to prevent them. Creating this kind of environment is a radically ambitious undertaking. It means rethinking how we approach safety activities, the measures we use to monitor progress and define success, and the way we engage employees at all levels. Simply, the injury-free culture starts with leaders who take ownership for safety. This article suggests eight key questions that leaders need to ask and answer in order to begin this shift in thinking. These questions are meant as a starting point, but are also useful for self-evaluation for leaders already engaged in building an injury-free culture.

1. Do we demonstrate a conviction that all injuries are preventable?

Leaders can create a culture where safety is a driving value, and many state publicly that such is their goal. Yet our actions are the things that determine whether people take our words to heart. A leader must develop this statement into a personal vision that is demonstrated through his/her actions. Chief among these are how we respond to exposure data, what we do when an incident happens, and how we oversee the incident report process. For example, when we receive exposure data, do we acknowledge and thank those who flag exposures? When an incident happens, do we demonstrate a personal interest in the well-being of the employee? Do we assure the area is secure?

2. Do we have the right programs in place to improve performance?

Knowing whether or not we are "covering all the bases" with respect to exposure reduction is less a question of quantity than of quality and configuration. Many organizations find themselves swamped with safety programs that produce improvement in some areas (for instance, medical case rates), but offer little or no improvement in more severe, life-altering injuries. As leaders, we need to continually assess existing systems and take a critical review of change proposals. For example, we need to ask: Where are the gaps with regard to exposure reduction here? What's working and what isn't? What will help us close those gaps?

Proposed changes need to be based on good science with proven results. Changes also need to be aligned with the safety climate and culture we are trying to create.

3. Do we implement our safety programs with enthusiastic safety leadership?

Having the right programs is only half the battle. A good program implemented poorly, or with little enthusiasm or support from leaders, is unlikely to deliver high value. It can also cause employees to question the value management truly places on safety. A common (if puzzling) warning sign of poor leadership is the perception among employees that the organization is "going over the top" on safety. This kind of

statement is actually a commentary on the negative impact the systems are having on the people they are supposed to benefit — instead of producing tangible (or enough) benefits, the systems are adding a burden to the employees who administer them. Leaders need to ask periodically how the customers (employees) perceive safety programs, whether they are adding value and if quantity is in proportion to quality. Consistent leadership support that is carried out with conviction, along with a well-articulated business case for why we do the things we do, supports a culture where safety is part of how we work, rather than an onerous "add-on."

4. Do we have proactive data that warns us that exposure to injury is increasing?

The more successful we are at safety improvement, the less we can rely on traditional indicators such as injury rates. Our ability to move to longer periods of injury-free experience depends on how well we address increases in exposure, as well as the systems generating those increases. What's crucial is understanding what is happening at the working interface — the configuration of equipment, tools, procedures and human action that defines the worker's interaction with the technology. When there is a misalignment in this interface, the chance of an undesired event goes up. It is important that leadership teams have reliable data on what is happening to exposure, in a quantifiable way, at the working interface. This information is especially important for the small subset of exposures that have a higher likelihood of leading to life-altering injuries and fatalities. This type of data can be collected in a manner that is statistically valid if the mechanism established assures the right exposures are being measured, and a sampling plan is followed that assures adequate, high-quality data is collected in the right situations.

5. Do we demonstrate true ownership for the results, culture, safety climate and the supporting systems?

Ownership comes through words and action. Knowing how many people in your group have been injured, the direction safety performance is moving, exposure data and direction, and having ready access to the state of the safety improvement plan and where critical safety action items stand, are all examples that demonstrate ownership.

True ownership is also characterized by optimism. Leaders avoid statements that suggest the results or situation is outside their control; rather, they express an understanding of the challenges and knowledge of what they are doing to remedy them. Finally, ownership requires that the leader understand the interconnection of culture, leadership and systems. This means that the leader is constantly looking for system causation of variation, instead of assigning blame.

6. Is it safe for employees to challenge our business decisions and the implications they have on the safety climate and organizational culture?

Exposure is introduced into the organization by variation at the working interface. Variation can be caused by the employee

being unmotivated, untrained or unskilled; it can also be caused by unsafe conditions, inadequate tools or materials, or procedures that are inaccurate or even nonexistent. This variation can and should be measured systematically. Exposure can also be introduced upstream of the interface through the decisions that leaders make regarding the systems that provide organizational consequences or that cause a state where employees are feeling psychologically unsafe.

Safety leadership means considering the long-term implications of all decisions. A safety leader not only encourages and accepts input regarding how a decision could negatively impact exposure, culture or systems, but also establishes mechanisms that solicit this type of information as a standard part of the decision-making process.

7. Are we open to the idea that system failures contribute to accident causation?

Organizational systems, not words, tell employees what is real. What we determine about staffing levels, supervisory development, promotions (e.g., how we handle leaders who are highly productive but demonstrably unconcerned for employee well-being), budgets or new projects all introduce changes into the systems that provide consequences for organizational behavior, in turn affecting exposure levels. Many leaders are surprised when they learn the root cause of an incident traces back years to an organizational decision made at a very high level. Yet, decisions that influence safety, even indirectly, are made all the time.

Consider what message it sends when leaders tell employees to report all injuries, while at the same time offering incentives to workgroups that go 15 (or 25 or 100) days without an injury. Again, what message does it send when an organization talks about the importance of safety and the value of its employees, yet reviews supervisor performance 90% on production and 10% on safety? In both instances, the system is actually providing positive consequences for behaviors (not reporting injuries, encouraging employees to take shortcuts) that contradict

our stated goals (working safely). When words are not aligned with systems, systems typically win.

As leaders, we need to think through the unintended consequences that our systems may be providing. We also need to consider the influence that new system changes may have on the level of exposure, even in decisions that may not have an obvious safety impact.

8. Are we developing tomorrow's leaders?

An injury-free culture is a long-term project. It requires continuity in leadership strength and skill, which means that, in addition to leading performance today, we need to identify and develop leaders to take over down the road. This process starts by understanding the qualities of great safety leadership, including personality, values and emotional commitment, leadership style, and practices of effective safety leaders. It also means including safety leadership as part of the recruiting, hiring and training process of new leaders we bring on board.

Taking Ownership

An injury-free culture is present whenever an organization is saying and doing things such that they go increasingly longer periods without an injury. In these cultures, leaders communicate a reasonable standard in which people can see the logic, and generate alignment around these goals throughout the organization. This discussion begins with the questions that leaders ask themselves and others about exposure, systems, culture and leadership itself. In this way, leaders take ownership of safety and help make the injury-free culture a reality. ♦

— *Donald R. Groover is vice president of BST, a global safety consulting firm that helps companies create injury-free workplaces.*

**If you have questions about this topic or other safety issues,
please contact safetyfirst@aist.org.**
