Beginning the Journey to a Zero-Harm Workplace

By Sharon Kemerer

Most companies aspire to be leaders in safety, to dramatically reduce trailing indicators and share their improvements with others both internally and externally. In the beginning, it is easy to make improvements: ensure that policies and guidance exist to support compliance, focus on easy improvements and put basic monitoring and communication in place. In other words, companies start by harvesting the low hanging fruit. Most of this initial (and satisfying) effort is owned and accomplished by the safety and health team at the local, regional and corporate levels.

After these initial successes, however, most companies reach a plateau. For many, this is usually when the recordable injury rate dips below 1.0. At this point, many companies ask, “Now that we are good, how do we become great, in a sustainable way?” The next step to greatness requires changing the fundamental business culture. Obviously, this task is neither easy nor one that happens overnight.

This article outlines the steps undertaken by one global manufacturing company in its ongoing quest to achieve a zero-harm workplace. The focus is on zero harm rather than zero incidents because the former is a proactive approach that places the power, responsibility and ability to improve in employees’ hands.

Consequently, employees become the team members who ultimately identify and eliminate hazards and lower the overall workplace risk level. In contrast, a zero-incidents approach focuses on the outcome (i.e., trailing indicators), with limited ability to control them. Zero harm focuses on the presence of safety, while zero incidents focus on its absence.

In any organization, culture drives safety performance. Additionally, a change in culture must precede a significant change in safety outcomes. But, what is culture? Merriam-Webster defines it as “the beliefs, customs, arts of a particular society, group, place, or time; a particular society that has its own beliefs, ways of life, art or a way of thinking, behaving or working that exists in a place or organization (such as a business).” Culture is the way individuals interact and connect, the way they dress and the way they behave. Changing a culture requires commitment, vision and multilevel engagement.

A culture change journey is never short, but it can be full of learning and satisfaction. The author has engaged in such a culture change journey with Baxter Healthcare Corp. for more than 4 years. In the following outline, the author shares lessons learned and offers some simple tools. In the words of Lao Tzu, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

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Chart the Initial Course

Use simple visual tools to communicate strategy and the business case. A simple graphic image can be used to communicate the overall existing strategy and the direction chosen for safety. In the author’s case, the company discussed a three-pronged approach to address commonly occurring recordable injuries and serious or major injuries, and how its future state was envisioned (Figure 1).

Next, a simple business case document is helpful to communicate consistently, conduct management discussions and gain engagement for the process. This document helps facilitate and focus elevator talks. Business leaders must know what level of resources are needed and what time commitment is required. A simple template was used to communicate our proposed process (Table 1, p. 26).

Get Partners Involved

Do not try to accomplish the change process alone. Getting active involvement from multiple levels in an organization accomplishes many goals:

- Using a group process automatically creates an initial group of champions. Once on board, task force members will not want the effort to fail. It is easy to fail alone; it is more difficult to fail as a committed group.
- Diverse representation not only spreads out the work, but also provides input from many perspectives.
- Partners help communicate outside the group as the process progresses.
- By reaching outside the safety and health organization, the ultimate stakeholders provide an ongoing sounding board and reality check for feasibility of strategies.

The company divided the effort into two basic levels: a working task force and a high-level steering committee to provide oversight. Human resources professionals were invited to both groups. For the working task force, safety and health team members were recruited from facility, regional and corporate levels with global representation in all four functional regions: North America, Latin America, Asia Pacific and Europe.

The small steering committee included the vice president of environment, health and safety, a human resources vice president supporting manufacturing and a vice president of manufacturing operations. The task force did the work and the steering committee was kept informed. Assignments should recognize other work demands, and credit to team members should be liberally and visibly extended.

Set a reasonable schedule for meetings and have a clear purpose for each one. Keep meetings on time and respect the task force members’ workloads. In reality, much of the work will be accomplished by the safety and health core team. However, it is highly recommended to give each task force member at least one assignment to provide them with enhanced engagement.

Learn From Experts & Successful Peers Dive Into Existing Literature

Literature review is ideal for sharing with task force members in reasonable portions. The primary sources are professional journal articles on safety leadership and effective strategies; publications on transformational leadership; professional conferences; presentations by thought leaders on safety culture; and articles on business leaders who are engaged in safety—how they do it and what they say (quotes from respected business leaders can be powerful).

Create an easy-to-use format for team members to report back on their learnings. Keep it simple, and ask for the main points of the publication or presentation. This will make it easier to capture, summarize and learn from your research.
Learning from this phase included:
• When leaders make safety critical, world-class safety performance is possible.
• Efforts must be customized to fit the organization. No one-size-fits-all safety culture transformation exists.
• Building community and local ownership is key.
• Safety culture champions should be at all levels of the organization.
• Clear expectations and standardization of resources decreases wide variations in performance and can lead to more consistent performance.
• Safety culture should not be seen as a separate culture, but one that lives within the existing culture, utilizes a shared language and builds on the existing process.

Benchmark With Respected Companies
Much can be learned from companies that have previously journeyed through a culture change. Do not limit efforts to companies in the same business line. Safety strategies span across different types of business and can be more apparent in a different type of workplace than your own.

However, do not overlook those pockets of excellence in your company. In the author’s case, the company had numerous sites with exemplary safety performance. What were they doing that others in the same company were not? This is an invaluable question to ask, and provides ready responses when underperforming locations say that it cannot be done.

As a global manufacturer of healthcare products, the author’s company chose to benchmark with other global corporations in pharmaceutical manufacturing; global beverage production and supply; personal care products manufacturing; healthcare products manufacturing; and internal high performers.

The company began by developing detailed questions that spanned more than 10 pages, then quickly threw it out. It found that focusing on detailed questions often disturbed the flow of the benchmarking dialogue and hampered the quality of information exchange. Instead, a small number of conversational categories were used to guide the discussions:
• How would you describe your safety culture?
• How does leadership demonstrate its involvement and commitment?
• How do employees at various levels learn what they are expected to do for safety?
• How do you get employees engaged and actively owning safety?
• How is safety integrated into business systems?
• What data do you use to drive your safety program decisions?
• How do you recognize safety achievements?
• How do you hire and develop safety talent?
• What other advice do you have?

Teams of at least two participants were involved in each benchmarking meeting to eliminate bias and ensure that valuable learnings were captured.

Learning from this phase included:
• Senior leadership ownership and active involvement is a highly effective driver of success.
• Safety should be seen as a core value, not as a priority. Priorities change, values do not.
• Culture transformation takes time and ongoing commitment.
• Feedback to employees on safety suggestions/identified hazards is vital.
• Branding helps support the message and raise awareness.
• Training for leaders is highly correlated with safety leadership ability.
• Responsibility for safety lies with all business levels, not just with the safety and health team.

Listen to Internal Stakeholders
As part of the data gathering, the task force conducted more than 30 interviews with team members at all levels of the organization. Discussions were usually no more than 15 minutes, and a simple set of opening questions were consistently used. Interviews were conducted at high-performing and low-performing locations, in various countries.

Learnings from this phase included:
• Leaders were not receiving training in how to lead for safety.
• Conversations about safety with employees were primarily focused on discussing and correcting negative behaviors.
• Hourly employees had a great deal of energy around safety and numerous ideas to offer. Just having the dialogue was valuable.
Pull It Together & Do a Gap Analysis

Performing a gap analysis is another key opportunity to pull the task force together. Face-to-face attendance for as many as possible supports active engagement in the discussion. The company blocked a 4-hour period and kept the energy level high. Short presentations came from those who had gathered information, with key learnings identified. Make the learnings highly visible so that patterns emerge and participants can identify them. Acknowledge where there is room for improvement; that is the point of the entire initiative.

Learnings from this exercise included:

- Commitment to changing/improving a safety culture takes time.
- Clear visible leadership is needed from the top.
- Employees must know their role in safety at each level in the organization.
- Training and resources must be provided to fulfill role expectations.
- The organization must provide the time and resources for training to occur.
- Common leading indicators should be identified and tracked to support consistency.
- Safety must integrate with the existing culture and the business language.
- The company had opportunities in the following areas:
  - building consistency;
  - clearly defining expectations and safety behaviors;
  - providing easy-to-use tools;
  - providing easy access to resources for all employees;
  - training managers on safety leadership behaviors and communication.

Branding Is Important, Keep It Simple

This process led to the creation of Baxter’s Safety Connection, a portal for employees to connect to easy-to-use safety information, read simple stories about successes at other locations and learn how to connect with fellow employees. Task force members worked with a graphic designer to develop a custom image to convey the vision and a platform to provide transparency around safety behavior expectations at all levels.

Information is organized into four employee levels, each with a clear mission to fulfill:

- Employees: Work safe and smart.
- Supervisors and managers: Teach and guide.

- Facility leadership: Lead with passion.
- Senior leadership: Set the tone and vision.
  Each employee level is color coded and resources are provided on consistent, simple templates. One-page guides in the toolbox at each level can be used as posters or handouts, or to guide a change-of-shift safety discussion. The site is transparent, with employees at all levels able to view the expectations of others.

Communication Channels Must Be Direct

To provide timely safety updates and to support local ownership of safety, the company created the safety agent role. The primary function is a communication channel and to provide local support when the Safety Connection was introduced. Instead of sending safety announcements to regional leaders and asking for distribution to facilities, communication can be sent directly to more than 160 locations simultaneously. Web-based training is provided at least twice a year for safety agents and frequent communications are kept short and focused.

The Journey Continues

Current efforts around culture transformation are focused on the training gap for managers. We have designed and are deploying manager safety skill training in all regions. Initial studies of its effectiveness are highly positive. The first facility to complete training for all managers has experienced a 30% reduction in their recordable case rate in 1 year, while at the same time experiencing a dramatic increase in employee head count.

The next step is to focus on leading indicators and provide clear guidance on how to improve key elements of local safety management systems. A simple timeline of the journey to date can be visualized as follows: Our journey is far from over. Perhaps it will never end. Good luck with yours.

References

Sharon Kemerer, M.S.N., COHN-S/CM, FAANHN, is corporate director, occupational health and safety, at Baxter Healthcare Corp., where she is responsible for the global safety and occupational health programs for Baxter’s 80,000 employees. Prior to this, she was executive director for American Board for Occupational Health Nurses. Kemerer holds a B.S. in Nursing from University of Illinois at Chicago, and an M.S. in Nursing from Loyola University Chicago.

TABLE 1
The Future of Safety: Keep the Business Case Clear & Simple

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem or purpose statement</th>
<th>Project description and goals</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why this initiative should be undertaken, and what can be achieved. For us, we recognized that progress had been made but we were not at the level we envisioned as a corporation. This is “why we want to do it.”</td>
<td>Simple description of the major steps, the proposed structure and the anticipated timeline for completion. This is “how we are going to do it.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business case summary</td>
<td>Challenges and risk for success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link successful completion to business benefit: increased productivity, decreased costs, enhanced employee morale and enhanced reputation. This is “why it should be done.”</td>
<td>Outline the elements needed for success so that resources, including management time and support for necessary travel can be discussed. This is “what we need to be successful.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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