

Toward Compliance or Global Class?

Compliance and High Performance are different targets. Leaders can't have it both ways.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Dec 01, 2014

Do you demand compliance or long for excellence? Sure, many of us want it both ways--to have everyone follow all policies and procedures *and* work toward global-class performance. But an overriding leadership challenge is deciding where to focus. Driving for compliance means navigating on a different roadway than the one that heads toward highest-level Safety and culture. Aiming toward either objective transmits different expectations and messages.

Trying to force compliance runs counter to inviting engagement. Of course, following Safety rules and procedures is critical (especially in process safety), but workers are most likely to embrace and put these into action when they understand and value their need, not when rules seem arbitrarily mandated, excessively complicated, or to get in the way of their work.

This mirrors the differences underlying Security and Safety leadership mindsets. Security entails setting up systems to protect against anyone, everyone, and everything; the assumption is that any person could do anything at any time. Seemingly satisfied long-term employees can inexplicably "snap" and then wreak havoc on equipment, processes, or people; even remote external threats might become real and dangerous. A lock-down Security paradigm necessitates being continually suspicious; essentially all are considered potentially guilty regardless of previous harmlessness.

But the critical approach in highest-level Safety performance is to *support* rather than *suspect* workers. Treating employees as valued resources rather than punishing or casting aspersions on them, basically assuming they're innocent until proven guilty (and without looking hard to do the latter). Seeing them as wanting to take care of their own Safety the best they know how, rather than being stupid,

willful, immature, ornery, or determined to be thorns in Safety's sides. Where leaders willingly acknowledge that those completing tasks likely know the most about these, and that eliciting employee buy-in is critical to their engaging in safe actions.

Even highly skilled leaders can't simultaneously walk two divergent paths. It's difficult to be both encourager and punisher at the same time, just as one policeman can't be both "Good Cop" and "Bad Cop" during an investigation. Flipping messaging from supportive to accusing confuses people and fosters distrust. Workers typically become suspicious. Then, because they don't want to expose themselves to being written up, humiliated, or worse, they protect and cover themselves by not sharing information that's potentially important for higher-level prevention.

Even though there are typically forces they can't control, strategic leaders are intentional; they select a course and aim for that. They realize that something may come up that either inspires or requires them to veer away from their original destination and that unexpected events may detour them from their most desired route. While, no surprise, I'm biased toward targeting global-class Safety performance and culture, I also know it's sometimes practical to plan for compliance--to, at least short term, stop the bleeding (perhaps literally, unfortunately).

But wise leaders don't neutralize their own efforts by talking compliance and excellence in the same breath. Where this dichotomy typically shows up:

Motivation: Compliance-oriented leaders default toward fear or guilt as motivator: "Work safe or else you will be punished, hurt, dead, not be able to see your children" (pick one). They may repeatedly show videos of people getting grievously hurt due to inattention and how this horrific accident has devastated their lives. Motivation often takes the voice of a stern parent warning or castigating a child.

On the other side, excellence-seeking leaders inspire internal motivation. Communications are designed to draw or entice workers toward the personal benefits of Safety to them (getting better at your favorite hobbies, protecting your family, more energy, and more).

Safety investigations: Leaders driving compliance focus on determining who was guilty/responsible for the incident. So investigations are typically of the "Shame and Blame, Witch Hunts and Warfare" variety.

In contrast, leaders emphasizing highest performance realize they can only change the future, not the past, and that coming down hard on someone who's been hurt

(or had a close call) is likely to shut down their willingness to honestly communicate. Focus of these investigations? "We want to do whatever we can to prevent something like this from again happening to you or anyone else."

"Accident repeaters": Compliance leaders disparagingly speak of those who've had multiple incidents as "Repeat Offenders," "Frequent Fliers," or "Accident Repeaters." They assume that the cause of repetitive incidents is a personal flaw or problem within that worker. Leaders default to punishing these employees into somehow not getting hurt again, or toward creating a kind of "safety prison" intervention so negative that the worker will act safer in the future in order to avoid going through this. These approaches frequently backfire.

Leaders setting sight on global-class performance see there are numerous contributing "ingredients" in repeat accidents. Knowing this, they don't negatively label those currently in a repetitive chain as being totally at fault. They enlist a systems approach to identify and reduce other-than-worker contributors to these repeat incidents, help such workers dispassionately see their part in these incidents, and then provide them with new and potent skills for improved safety performance. They elevate Safety rather than cut down people.

Compliance and High Performance are different targets. Leaders can't have it both ways, focused predominantly on "Do as you're told" *and* on "Take control of your own Safety. Watch, sample, assess, decide and do." While it's possible to progress from a cultural stage of demanding compliance toward one of global-class Safety, this requires a clear shift in leadership mindset and communications.

Do you know where you're currently aiming? And do your communications and actions consistently move toward this direction?

About the Author

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