
Early Vision Leadership

Focus on earliest indicators of momentum. Actions taken usually don't blossom into statistical changes for a period of time.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Dec 01, 2016

Sometimes something unexpected can reveal what we take for granted. This past week, I was presenting "Global Class Safety Through Preventing Personal Injuries" at the Georgia Safety Conference in Macon when a side—insightful, and somewhat inciting—question was asked.

During the presentation, I contended many companies predominantly rely on trailing indicators (such as number of accidents or Lost Days per Worker per Year, etc.) to view their progress but that this may not provide an accurate picture of how an organization is progressing. That trailing indicators only reflect part of the past and don't tell you what's happening in the present. That, in the same way that most investing ads caveat, "Past performance is not an indication of future performance," a company can experience up and down results (and, especially when there are relatively few injuries, even one or two more in the next quarter can significantly affect statistical results). That when previous injury logs are given total weight within a company (rewards structures, discipline, yardmarker for promotions, more), these can be mis- or under-reported. For example, I've heard several Corporate Safety Directors or global companies confide that many injuries—especially slips/trips/falls—are not at all fully reported in their international operations due to varying cultural viewpoints of Safety. (And perhaps due to concerns about repercussions for reporting—or fear of embarrassment?)

That's when the question from a senior Safety professional was posed: "I agree that trailing indicators alone don't paint an accurate picture of how we're really doing. So why do companies do this?"

Seems logical, but rarely asked. Why ever do people persist with approaches that are highly limited at best, minimally useful most of the time? Until we understand

why many people do something, it's hard to get a handle on it—and therefore, as a leader, difficult to change patterns of action that may not help us get to higher levels of performance. And this applies beyond leadership and to injury prevention (e.g., bending at the waist to pick something up, when everyone arguably "knows better"). Not understanding can also generate embittered frustration, as in, "What's the matter with people? Am I just wasting my time and breath?" I've heard variations on this blues theme numerous times.

Of course, it's likely that different people do the same thing for different reasons. But my first assumption is that broadly similar actions become habits because they're easy, so people are used to doing things that way. Tracking trailing indicators is already required by many regulating agencies as a common denominator to attempt to compare Safety results across companies and within an industry. Quantified trailing indicators makes it easier for regulators and internal auditors to determine whether a company stands out for commendation or sticks out for closer investigation. And these kind of data are already readily available, so, hey, why not just rely on this to indicate how we're doing? And for many, "statistics" smacks of some kind of hard, scientific reality in an arena dominated by human squishy ambiguity with lots of uncontrollable variables. But one element that distinguishes high-level leaders is they grasp that "easy" doesn't necessarily mean "effective." We've worked to significantly reduce complexly multi-contributing factor soft-tissue injuries; we've seen how many easy/simple "solutions" (writing another policy/procedure, disseminating back belts, creating equations that purport to scientifically restrict material loads to safe levels, and more) don't significantly improve back and overall soft-tissue safety.

Probably the second reason for staying on staying on the trailing indicator-only train is inertia. "A body at rest tends to remain at rest; a body in motion tends to remain in motion." Same with any mindset that gets stuck in place. I guess this is a variation of "easy" but often results in active resistance to new approaches. In fact, according to Thomas Kuhn ("The Structure of Scientific Revolutions") and others, the history of science is replete with documented tales of "leaders" doing their utmost to fight off change, even changes that proved reality-based and obvious in retrospect. (Remember how Galileo was actually convicted of heresy for declaring the earth revolved around the Sun and not the other way around?)

Third possible reason is there's no standard, no consensus on which leading indicators truly lead to improved safety results.

So, what do we recommend? Focus on earliest indicators of momentum. Actions taken usually don't blossom into statistical changes for a period of time. For example, we suggest that even with a powerful intervention, back injury statistics

may take months to show progress, and that the usual course of Safety improvement is:

1. *Receptivity becomes heightened.* People accept there might be some issues they previously weren't seeing and really consider new methods for working with greater Safety (mental skillsets of mindfulness, planning, and decision making and physical skillsets of greater control, balance, coordination, ability to apply usable strength, and more). One of the hallmarks of receptivity is that people are moved to try out different actions to attain better results. And because receptivity occurs *within* people, it's not readily observable externally. The most effective way to monitor this is through creating leading indicators of some kind of interviewing process, and there are many ways to accomplish this.

2. *Actions change.* If workers and managers actually believe/buy in/are aboard Safety improvements, their actions will change. At first, these might be tentative, self-conscious, or inconsistent, but new ways of doing tasks are observable and therefore reinforceable. Self-assessment, anecdotal reports, co-worker assessment, and key Safety member observations can all become leading indicators of whether actions begin to change. (Of course, it's essential that new actions are also a step up from previous ones.)

3. *Trailing indicators improve.* When Receptivity is followed by *effective* change in actions, trailing indicator Safety results reflect this progression.

There's a good chance you'll always have responsibility for reporting trailing indicators. Just don't steer your safety system solely by watching these factors. With some thought and the input of different stakeholders, it's relatively easy to come up with a range of leading indicators for any desired Safety improvement—from mindfulness to engagement to more activated leadership to developing team connections between younger and older workers, and more. It means looking for "acorns" rather than only cataloging old-growth oaks.

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