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Leading thoughts

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Leading Thoughts
Toward Global-Class Safety

By Robert Pater

Statistically, every organization cannot perform in a superior manner. Many will be at the mean, a few will rise and others will stay flat. This is not haphazard, as there are reasons for different levels of performance. But, who does not want to be world-class, stand out from the crowd or have the satisfaction of knowing that their safety performance is par excellence, their staff members highly protected and their executives proud of their results?

Setting sights on global-class safety is not for everyone. First, rising to the top of any field requires continuous and committed attention and effort. This weeds out many who do not have the energy or interest to progress beyond good enough. It may not be an actual priority for some leaders to aim for global-class safety; this shakes up an organization's cultural classes and sets. Further, it raises expectations of quality, consistency and engagement against which all efforts, interventions and actions will be measured. Slightly better-than-average results seem great when people are used to less, while even stronger-than-industry performance is disappointing when people expect global class.

Penetrating the Global-Class Safety Myths

AWhat if a company decides to make this journey toward global-class safety? No standard definition for global-class safety exists, so how can stellar performance be measured? Many default toward trailing indicators, such as "How many injuries (reportables or recordables) did we have last period?" However, many professionals realize that these can be manipulated when there are ulterior motives, and pressures to do so infect many companies. For example, published reports exist of companies lying and hiding, going so far as to count an incident-caused day in the hospital as modified work. Yet, leading indicators alone do not accurately chart performance. While such markers to provide on-the-way feedback, they basically reflect, "We are not there yet but are moving in the right direction."

Any measure of global class must incorporate both current movement markers and past performance indicators. It should also include a company's day-to-day operations, as well as how it responds to adversity/incidents; this may be the ultimate reflection of its true safety culture. Consider also that companies in different countries often have varying expectations or standards of what constitutes an injury. Many multinational organizations also adopt OSHA-like reporting. So, it can be difficult to determine if one is comparing tangerines to tacos. Then, there is the issue of consistency. Is a company global class if it shows stellar results, however measured, for 1 or 2 years, then falls off? Where are the dividing lines?

Defining Global Class

Following are 12 significant characteristics, actions and approaches of global-class safety performance organizations. Admittedly, they are somewhat arbitrary (e.g., is only 88% expressed engagement a disqualifier?) and are meant to serve as general guidelines. But, they offer a checklist for charting.

1. Trailing indicator results are in the top 2% in their sector, measured on dimensions of reportables/100 employees/year. Although reportables is a more vague measure than lost-time injuries (LTI), many global class companies tend to measure this because they do not have significant numbers of more severe LTIs.
2. At least 90% of workers say they are actively engaged in safety.

3. A minimum of 85% say they believe that management is sincerely concerned about workers personal safety.
4. The company continues to pilot new approaches and methods. These include refining continuing processes.
5. Focus is on both at-work and at-home safety, with training and meetings addressing each.
6. Senior managers consistently communicate about the company's safety commitment. This includes high expectations of no-blame, close-call, near-miss reporting; personal control for safe decisions and actions from bottom to top; and perceptions that the organization is fully committed to safety being intrinsic to its overall mission.
7. Safety expectations and training are clearly incorporated into hiring and orientation. Safety is a factor in promotions and performance reviews.
8. Credit is given for forward-thinking safety suggestions and innovations, however small.
9. Safety conversations are two-way with minimal lecturing and maximum back-and-forth.
10. Safety committees are active, have budgets and receive training. They are expected to lead, rather than merely meet for meetings sake.
11. Curiosity is valued with continued attempts to fix what is not broken (credit here to Anil Mathur, CEO of Alaska Tanker Co., recognized by many organizations as the world's safest and most environmentally responsible oil tanker company).
12. The company demonstrates nimbleness and defaults toward trying innovative approaches rather than resting on past performance. In diametrical contrast, a highly bureaucratic organization intrinsically emphasizes maximizing stability by slowing down change; such a culture augurs against attaining global-class performance.

What Gets in the Way of Highest-Level Performance?

Highest-level performance can be torpedoed by limited skill sets, strategy or self discipline, such as these seven blockages:

1. Self disqualifying in advance. The self-fulfilling prophecy of believing it is impossible to attain stellar performance. This also operates within certain professional sports teams that seem destined to self implode, to be perpetual losers, no matter how much they change players or leaders. Of course, this is a mind-set problem.
2. Impatience. Expecting grand paybacks too soon leads some to quit before potential interventions can take place. Impatience can also show itself as jumping too far ahead, as in "We have to be world-class now!" This occurs when the company's culture is at level 2 of 4 (see "Cultural Leadership: Stepping Up the 4 Levels", in PS, April 2012), or not maintaining focus, exhibiting a flavor-of-the-month mentality. Best companies hone processes in depth rather than attempting to do many things superficially. Repetition and consistent practice create mastery.
3. Command and control. Some leaders cannot stop themselves from wanting to control others or micromanaging in ways that undercut the engagement and shared efforts required for global-class safety performance. Such engagements are critical after right policies, procedures and process safety are in place. Ultimately, ownership of safety performance has to occur at the level of each worker's life. Even when minimally observed at work and at home, every individual feels internally committed to be attentive, uses good judgment, then calls on and utilizes best safety methods and equipment, and supports coworkers' safety. Command-and-control leadership blocks creative solutions and generates push back resulting in resistance and compliance, diverting the company away from the path of highest-level culture and performance.
4. Leadership insecurity. Change threatens to upset the cart, which some leaders may fear is already shaky. Doing the same things eventually shows diminishing returns. For example, people stop paying attention to the same safety topics, posters, videos and training communicated in the same way. Moving toward safety mastery requires taking a risk to try new things.
5. Not understanding the process of attaining relatively quick and sustaining change. For example, assuming that I tell and they do actually takes and lasts. Or, thinking that will alone is enough to create improvement, without backing this with needed skills and structure.
6. Not strategically identifying blockages to raising the culture.
7. Not seeing where the company should go or what global class looks like. While not every company can achieve global class, almost any organization can attain higher levels of safety culture with the right approach.

10 Keys to Global Class Safety

1. Adopt a global-class mind-set. All leaders associate commitment with being best in class. They abandon the concept of a steady state and realize that ongoing improvements are essential to sustain current performance, much less ascend to higher planes. They frequently apply a quality mind-set to safety and build best practices into everything rather than trying to deal with problems after the fact.   Realizing that the strongest drive emanates from within, leaders eschew external incentives that have tangible value (e.g., buying safe actions). Rather, they may extend recognition but mainly encourage each person to be drawn to the personal benefits of safety. Leaders position safety, productivity, quality and satisfaction on par, avoiding strategies that put safety at odds with productivity.
2. Transfer skills. Leaders transfer skills and realize that only motivation, will or a strong, internal drive is not enough to achieve highest-level performance. They seek and disseminate more effective mental and physical methods for fulfilling tasks as efficiently and safely as possible. And, such world-class skills do exist.
3. Relentlessly invite engagement. High engagement levels are a hallmark of global-class organizations. Engagement creates energy and receptivity; boosts support; overcomes worker-manager and worker-worker divisions; generates creative ideas; and furthers overall safety performance and culture. It is essential to build engagement into every process, rather than have on-and-off campaigns or only applying these to select areas (e.g., safety committees.) For proven methods, see Strategies for Leading Engagement, in PS, May 2012.
4. Intervene from top-down to a scissors approach. It is more effective to cut through a piece of material with scissors than just one knife coming down. As cultures move toward global class, movement is from executives and other managers predominantly driving safety to their sharing leadership with line workers, who carry the baton of on-the-floor training and reinforcing best practices. (For more information, see my article, "Scissoring Through Barriers" at http://tinyurl.com/PaterScissoring.)
5. Motivation becomes more personal and positive. Intel CEO Emeritus Andrew Grove wrote, "Fear never creates peak

performance, only minimal performance." Many decisions and actions that affect safety are made personally and often without external monitoring. Raising safety culture and performance toward global class requires moving away from old-style motivation of guilt, shame and punishment toward positively enlisting people.

6. Inspire energy beyond just replicating processes. Energy fuels movement toward next performance levels. Energy is also needed to sustain highest-level performance. This entails injecting new ways to require training. Sincere passion makes points. Conversely, remove points if your company does the same things the same way.

7. Shift from outside-in to inside-out. Safety becomes internally driven. Emphasis is on stepping up from a rule-based culture in which workers are expected to understand, remember and apply an ever-increasing set of rules and procedures. As cultures move toward global class, employees are encouraged to think and understand more and memorize less. While there are always rules, policies and procedures, these are made as simple to recall and apply as possible; the aim is to help every employee make better individual decisions. Educating everyone on how to adjust to changing conditions tangibly backs this. There are fewer blanket catch phrases ("Lift with your legs", "Keep your wrists straight") and greater emphasis is placed on deeper understanding of principles involved in safely transferring potentially accumulating forces, as well as how to actually apply knowledge and skills to various tasks. Improving companies prefer to transfer principles and appropriate practices, rather than just handing down policies and procedures.

8. Lower radar, discern better. Global-class companies meticulously analyze job sites and work on hazard prevention and control. They shave down seemingly tolerable risks. This entails fine-tuning perceptions, or as Ron Bowles calls it, lowering "level of accepted risk".The emphasis is on seeing potential problems at the earliest possible stages, then tuning this perception in an ongoing process in which everyone probes and is helped to adjust their underlying assumptions about what is safe. Better to make a modification when sensing lower back tension than waiting until after it evolves to disabling pain.

9. Elicit feedback and disconnects. Most organizations send mixed messages about safety. Proclamations and wishful thinking coexist with hard deadlines and peak work pressures. The more frequent and stronger these mixed messages, the greater the disconnection between workers and managers, which then devolves into distrust and low morale. As companies move toward global class, they put a premium on surfacing and reducing mixed messages that are readily hidden, but still affect performance.

10. Balance strategic approach. Best companies develop an ongoing best-of-both-worlds mind-set of protecting and preserving what is still energizing and working with a change orientation of progressing and propelling, injecting new methods, applications, skill sets and tool sets. Organizations stuck at lower levels are often off balance (typically too much on the we've always done it this way side).

Conclusion

While global-class safety may only be attainable for the most ardent and committed, most companies can still realize significant and lasting improvements toward highest levels of safety culture and performance by first understanding what it takes to progress, then implementing those strategies needed to move up.

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