Persistence is a virtue in leadership but not when it comes to injuries that stubbornly continue to drag safety down. Does your organization have at least one nagging (tenacious) injury that it cannot seem to overcome? Even when safety strides are made elsewhere, these incidents continue to cause injuries, add to the company’s trailing indicators, cost time, hamper productivity and impede efforts to improve culture.

You likely have a fair idea of what typically comprises tenacious injuries. For many companies, this category usually includes soft-tissue/strains/sprains, slips/trips/falls, hand-related injuries or motor vehicle incidents. Often, proposed answers to these pervasive problems are merely variations of the same old prevention approaches that do not yield significant next-level improvements or, at best, stimulate gains that do not sustain. These approaches often rehash the same principles or methods that most seasoned professionals have already heard or instituted.

For example, how often have you heard that you can solve slips, trips and falls by measuring and controlling the coefficient of friction of surfaces? Or use gloves to prevent all hand injuries? Or expect workers to pay attention? While such interventions likely help, they rarely produce a sizeable decline in ongoing, performance-diminishing injuries.

Tenacious injuries can lead to cascading organizational cultural issues beyond the loss of resources. They potentially erode the credibility of safety professionals who may be (inappropriately) blamed for not solving complex ongoing problems, or they could result in budget rejections when safety leaders repeatedly seek resources to address recurring issues that never seem to be eliminated.

In some cases, leaders become discouraged and basically give up on vexing safety problems (although few would admit this). When this occurs, these leaders reluctantly accept these injuries as mission impossible and shift their attention toward other arenas where they hope to drive greater success. This is a natural response. It is tempting to focus on what we feel we can control rather than thinking we are simply wasting efforts and resources.

Breaking through the inertia of a tenacious injury plateau does not require magic, replacing workers or changing the nature of the business. Rather, it requires a focused, strategic approach to achieve substantial results, even in companies that believe they have tried everything.

Significant gains start with high-grading leadership vision. Among the biggest obstacles is a mindset that assumes these problems are 1) inevitable (“What can we do? Our workforce is aging.”); 2) failed (“Just a scan. No work ethic.”); or 3) due to a deficient workforce (“We’ve provided tools and training. Workers aren’t doing what they’re supposed to do.”). If workers are in a safety rut, the leader likely has not yet created a receptive environment or provided the resources and structural support needed to institute positive change.

Five Common Tenacious Injury Dynamics
Identifying contributing forces enables an organization to better control them. To determine what underlies persistent injuries, begin by noticing similar threads among tenacious injuries.

Dynamic 1: Tenacious injuries are complex, with multiple contributors that cannot be readily controlled through one-shot administrative, ergonomic or equipment fixes, or through signs and other reminders. For example, installing government company vehicles may address speeding but it does not change factors such as road rage, fatigue or poor maintenance.

As noted, slips, trips and falls plague many companies. Typically, they occur when at least two contributors are present: momentum, combined with vertical misalignment (i.e., upper body is either ahead of or behind lower body, with even a slight, sometimes minimally perceptible leaning). Add to this mix even a momentary redirection of attention away from adjusting on the fly to changes in work surfaces, when load of gravity shifts while carrying, or when sounds or people distract focus.

Dynamic 2: Tenacious injuries are typically personal and likely have off-work influences (that are not easily controlled). Reducing load weights at work will not prevent the buildup of cumulative trauma during at-home activities. How often have you heard that someone sustained a strain or sprain while moving something light-weight (or simply bending or turning)? Under time pressure, people resort to default actions. Thus, any solution to soft-tissue injuries must positively affect off-work decisions and acts in order to build positive, safe habit patterns and

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reduce buildup of small units of physical trauma.

Dynamic 3: Tenacious injuries have strong attentional components. While telling people to “watch what you are doing” may be well intentioned, doing so does little to reduce injuries. How specifically should employees watch? And to what should they pay attention? And when? And with which method?

Commands alone do not enable actions any more than ordering a 58-lb untrained person to “kick in that reinforced oak door” will yield desired results. Will or positive attitude only go so far, especially when it is the intent of a leader more than of the worker. This also adds to leadership frustration (“I told them to pay attention, yet they continue to lose focus and have accidents”).

The skill set of controlling attention is comprised of at least six specific skills (observing, selectivity, sustaining, switching, sequencing, self-monitoring). Experience indicates that most people can improve these skills to a good degree.

Dynamic 4: Tenacious injuries are often affected by uncontrollable environments. Factors in these environments include exposures to other people (e.g., drivers on open roads), working in older facilities where wholesale retrofitting is not an option in the near future, operating on clients’ or public turf, and at-home contributors.

Dynamic 5: Tenacious injuries have been targeted by different, yet same-old interventions. These interventions range from campaigns (i.e., intellectual attempts to persuade workers to avoid these injuries), to quick and inexpensive tools (e.g., back belts to eliminate lumbar strains), to writing increasingly elaborate policies, procedures and job safety standards, discipline for failure to comply with these rules, and spot monitoring of others’ actions, to rewarding not having injuries (or at least reporting them).

These same-old approaches rarely achieve breakthrough results. Most attempts to solve tenacious injuries are outside-in approaches. That is, they try to control external factors of environment or externally influence workers’ decisions and actions.

Most attempts to solve tenacious injuries are outside-in approaches. Strategies that lead to sustainable improvements have strong inside-out components.

In contrast, strategies that lead to sustainable improvements have strong inside-out components. The underlying understanding is that:

1) Once basic organizational and tooling safety controls and adaptations are implemented, doing more of the same is unlikely to make a further difference (any more than a second scissors lift positioned next to a first one will reduce injuries).

2) Human factors are a vast, challenging contributor in all injuries, particularly ongoing ones.

3) A complementary internalized approach frequently proves most successful. This is founded on helping workers become more in control of their own safety, in all locations and times. Anil Mathur, president of Alaska Tanker Co., conformed for having the best safety record and culture in the oil tanker industry, proclaims, “I’ve always found that the only way people can change is from within. That’s why safety is most effective when it comes from inside.”

During my visit to a large manufacturing company based with consistently high numbers of soft-tissue injuries, the corporate safety director closed his door and vented his frustrations. “I’ve been telling them over and over, along with detailed charts, why they have to bend their knees before they lift. How come they listen to you and not to me?” Of course, bending the knees is but one small element of the training provided. Furthermore, simply telling or trying to logically persuade only goes so far.

Think about how your company approaches tenacious injuries. How much of the current messaging is just telling, rather than elevating the intent, assessment and decision-making attributes? Do leaders resort to directing or do they, as Mathur advises, find ways to have safety be self-reinforcing.

A Four-Step Strategy for Overcoming Tenacious Injuries

Like the reality of any organizational plan, this strategy is more of a guide than a blueprint. As Will Rogers said, “Planning gets you into things; hard work gets you out of them.” Given that, many companies have overcome longstanding plateaus of tenacious injuries by taking these four steps.

Step 1: Take strategic control. First identify which injuries you wish to reduce. If there are several, select just one to start. Learn what has been attempted and to what degree these approaches succeeded or fell short? Determine what prevented greater results.

Discern what is and is not directly controllable (e.g., highly dispersed or minimally supervised workforce, aging population, mixed-composition employees, unsupportive senior leaders). Then aim to effectively influence these. For example, it is best to take a small changes/leveraged approach where minimal efforts can potentially result in significant and early improvements. Set and communicate expectations that these targeted injuries are indeed not inevitable and that the company is determined to improve. Enlist a cross-level team to help unearth underlying contributors to the status quo. Do de facto mixed messages in the culture contribute to or justify having tenacious injuries (e.g., “Get over there fast with your tools but never carry on stairs”)? If so, how might you change these?

Be sure the strategy incorporates elements of communications, structure, actions and support reinforcement that specifically aim to reduce tenacious risks.

Step 2: Fortify attention. Tom Peters wrote, “Attention is all there is.” In other words, where you focus your attention is what you are most likely to get; what you ignore will likely get you.
In addition to developing and transmitting higher-level expectations, develop a range of tenacious-torpedoing leading metrics. The process of a multilevel group of leaders (ranging from workers through executives) arriving at agreed-on leading indicators is a powerful and essential step in redirecting safety from “putting out fires” toward surpassing the darkroom of repetitively occurring injuries. (For more on setting leading indicators, see my two-part article, “Use Leading Indicators to Derail Ergonomic Injuries” in Professional Safety, March and April 2017.)

Because attention is a critical element in all performance, and lowered ability to direct attention can lead to common incidents, it is essential to transfer tangible attention-control skills to everyone. Start with your leaders.

**Step 3: Influence efficiently.** OSH professionals directly influence those with whom they already have strong connections. Harness workers’ (and managers’) existing interest in preventing tenacious injuries.

For example, if slips and falls are prevalent, check whether organizational members currently engage in off-work physical activities or sports. If so, tell stories, share writings and transfer skills that address how developing better balance will improve their performance in that activity while also helping to prevent slips, trips and falls. In short, think of enlisting a personally energizing approach rather than just relaying advice or data.

In addition, deputize indirect influencers (once removed from professionals) by training and dispersing others in position to reach workers daily. When well prepared, these peer safety agents are typically more geographically available and have greater connections for transferring a safety mind-set and skill set. These force multipliers also help reduce incident repetition (where one or several workers are stuck in a repetitive injury loop).

**Step 4: Build personal safety** by advancing every worker into a further-seeing captain of his/her own leadership. Because most tenacious injuries are personal and individual (compared to process incidents, for example), dial up self-monitoring as a tangible method of heightening safety self-control. Everyone can quickly learn to regularly perform active self-observations for self-correction to avoid succumbing to injuries.

Overcoming persistent injuries requires a persistent approach. The two ultimate keys to overcoming tenacious injuries are to 1) plan and act to finally break through performance- and culture-derailing problems; and 2) develop workers as better resources in overcoming these injuries rather than viewing them as victims or obstinate resisters, placing them more in control of their attention and actions through mind-set and skills transfer. It is leveraging safety jujitsu. Help all workers get a tenacious grip on their own safety mind-set and build next-level skill sets so they are not defeated by tenacious injuries.