NAC **Executive Insights**

Safety Culture –
Human Performance Principles

Key Points

- This Executive Insight is part of the Safety Culture Series and highlights the human performance principles needed to create an effective safety culture.
- How companies should think about human performance is described.
- A series of safety leadership principles that underpins good safety performance is presented.
- A good safety climate requires trust between leadership and the workforce.
- Safety comes down to the performance of people.

Introduction

Safety is underpinned by both good safety management systems and the creation of a positive safety culture. A significant part of safety, however, comes down to the performance of people. In the past, it has been common for some organizations to blame someone when an accident occurs. This "blame culture" has often led to the dismissal of individuals deemed responsible for causing the incident in a desire to rid the organization of "unsafe" staff. This "blame culture" behavior, however, does not lend itself to creating the trusting, supportive culture needed for a positive safety climate.

On the contrary, companies that consistently deliver great safety performance acknowledge a need to recognize human performance principles. These leading companies underpin the implementation of these principles by leading in a way that reinforces these principles. This Executive Insight describes a set of safety leadership principles that can be used to reinforce these behaviors.

Definition of Human Performance Principles

Humans are not machines. People have good and bad days. People have feelings. Physical or mental health factors have an impact. To ingrain a strong safety culture and support good safety performance, organizations must recognize these realities and take steps to support their staffs.

One way of doing this is to create a set of human performance principles that states how an organization relates to the well-being of its staff. The following is an example of human performance principles:

- People will make mistakes.
- People's actions are rarely malicious and usually make sense to them at the time.
- Mistakes are typically due to underlying conditions and systems.
- Understanding why mistakes happen can help prevent or correct them.

- Facilities, tools, and activities can be designed to reduce mistakes and improve the management of risk.
- Leaders help shape the conditions that influence what people do.
- It matters how leaders respond when things go wrong.
- Improve existing tools and processes before adding new ones.

All incidents are preventable, yet they still occur. When investigating the root cause of incidents, one of the principles above is often present—such as a mistake was made, yet no one was being malicious. Perhaps the procedure or risks were not fully understood or the pressure of making progress was deemed to be important enough that the job progressed without the right precautions in place. Rather than blame individuals for what they did or did not do, look beyond their behavior to understand what was driving their decision making. Ask was the job properly planned, was the crew properly trained, were the right tools available, was the right oversight being provided, was there undue pressure to progress the work? Focusing on these underlying conditions and addressing these will help prevent any repeat of the incident.

Safety Leadership Principles

A good safety culture requires a safety climate that acknowledges the existence of human performance. The effectiveness of human performance principles, however, is only as good as the behavior of leaders reinforcing the messages based on their words and actions.

A good safety climate requires trust between leadership and the workforce. Leaders need to demonstrate that they listen to the workforce and are supportive of their needs.

To help achieve the right leadership behaviors consistently across an organization, it is important that the organization be transparent in terms of expectations. One way to achieve this is to publish a set of safety leadership principles that can be used to reinforce how leaders think and behave.

An example set of safety leadership principles includes the following:
- We will relentlessly pursue the ultimate objective of an injury-free workplace.
- We will not compromise our focus on safety to achieve any other business objective.
- We believe that our safety actions are most effective when we genuinely care about each other.
- We will maintain an environment for open and transparent reporting and recognize behavior which is consistent with our values.
- We will hold accountable those who knowingly disregard safety rules.

Note the last bullet refers to individuals who are repeat offenders or who clearly disregard safety rules. This may be seen as inconsistent with the human performance principle of people making mistakes, which are rarely malicious. When an individual is a repeat offender or is clearly disregarding safety rules, however, they put others at risk and must be dealt with. This action is consistent with what is commonly referred to as "Just Culture."

Summary/Conclusion

This Executive Insight describes why human performance is so important in creating a safe workplace. People are not machines. They can be distracted by physical or mental health issues that can impact their behavior. It is important that organizations recognize this and communicate this to their workforce. This can be done by creating and publishing a set of human performance principles.

It is also important that the leaders behave in a way that reinforces the validity of human performance principles. This creates trust between the leadership and the workforce and underpins more open and transparent reporting of incidents without fear of reprisal. To help achieve this style of leadership consistently across the organization, a set of safety leadership principles has also been suggested that provides common expectations for all.

About the Author

David O'Connor was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2020. In his 40-year career with Amoco & BP, he has served in engineering, technical, and leadership positions in the UK, Norway, Egypt, Middle East, Algeria, and the U.S. In 2015, he became head of all BP global projects in the Upstream Division. He is known for transforming project organizations into the best learning organizations in the industry. David retired from BP in 2020.