

Zero Harm and Incident Rates

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I was at the conference some time ago when a member of the audience asked why was zero harm ideology created and why we are still so addicted to it as well as injury frequency rates in trying to describe organisational safety performance?

Of course, a book can be written on the subject and many safety thought leaders have written extensively on this subject, however in a nutshell, this was my explanation:

- Zero harm ideology has its origins in deeply rooted thinking that safety is actually an absence of harm. As logical as it may sound, this of course is not the case. Safety is not an absence of anything but rather a presence of effective controls, alongside many other things, leadership mindfulness being one of the most important factors. It is far more productive and beneficial to track and measure presence of positives which when working well, are keeping the safety a 'dynamic non-event' whilst creating reliability, however this is laborious and requires drastic departure from traditionalist views of safety, risk and people. This departure requires a change of mindset amongst senior decision makers and this is a journey of knowledge and education, towards a paradigm shift which has already been more or less achieved amongst many senior safety professionals
- In absence of visible negative events and with subtle characteristics of many early warnings and indicators of impending catastrophes, staff and decision makers tend to be preoccupied by other, more tangible and pressing matters. Therefore when things do go wrong, the attention is always on the negative aspects of safety, not on positive. This in turn primes and confirms unconscious beliefs that safety is an absence of negatives rather than presence of positives. Of course, silence does not equal safety, on contrary; it should be very alarming and a cause for a constant state of organisational 'uneasiness'. Nevertheless, this association of safety with negatives rather than positives is a primary reason why organisations are still trying to quantify 'harm' through numbers and frequency rates associated with the visible portion of risk management failures which actually produce injuries. Yes, many organisations have lead indicators aimed at measuring things which people 'do' for safety but those often get lost in the noise made by 'negatives' such as frequency rates as an established paradigm in measuring safety performance, especially at the board and industry levels. Does the lack of serious financial losses in an organisation equal good profitability and sustainability? Does the lack of bullying and discrimination complaints in the business mean there is an existence of the workplace where this is frowned upon and people and leaders are upholding company and ethical values? Of course it does not, but here we are in safety and risk in 2018, still trying to believe that absence of incidents and injuries equals 'safety'. Absence of incidents and critical warning indicators should be a big cause for concern and state of constant unease, as Reason, Hopkins, and et al. point out in their work.

- There is a significant lack of understanding in many organisations about how safety and successful risk management actually works. There is a tendency to view safety in the same way as finance or production but minus the attention on the critical resourcing and functional inputs necessary for success which are usually given to those mainstream functions. This in turn leaves only – the visible outputs, which in safety are almost always negative, unless we consciously choose to look for positives. Unfortunately, not too many organisations measure things done for safety further upstream and especially at senior levels, especially those which ensure successful safe and productive performance, so we are forever left with bean counting at the basic operational levels, counting injuries and their frequencies instead of observing leadership behaviours, decision making and organising for safety, performing risk mapping and verifications of critical controls. I should also add that counting proactive things we do for safety in organisations is difficult and resource intensive. Many difficulties also exist in defining proactive in the first place. It requires knowledge and experience and it costs money and time but as we can see from the statistics, safety does not happen by itself. One of the biggest barriers in this space is an illusion which exist in the minds of many decision makers that they ‘know’ safety, often simply on the basis of STEM technical training and a belief that people are a problem which needs to be controlled. Past safety teachings in this area with triangles, linear people models apportioning blame in excess of 90% to people at the sharp end for accident causation and organisational cultural journey models where people are described as main accident causational factor are crippling factor in the progress of modern and innovative ideas in management of safety and risk. They will remain in place to hinder our progress unless we educate otherwise and progress in this area is very slow.
- Binary Opposition thinking and misguided ethical principles have a big part to play as well, as pointed out by several high profile safety academics. Too many people believe that ‘if you are not for zero harm, you must be happy to accept some injuries’. This in turn invokes the emotional linkage to values and ethics, although erroneously, and creates the emotional need for an artificial moral ground, where nothing but zero is acceptable. There is a real paradox in the way leadership feels the need to drive absolutistic goals even when all the evidence points against sustainability of such goals, but once commitments are publicised and ‘goals’ committed to, it is very difficult to backtrack on them, although many organisations are silently doing exactly that in this space. Reasoning that even if not achievable, ‘zero’ goals can be used as moral and aspirational targets do not stand well to scrutiny. Goals and aspirations depend critically on motivation and empowerment of leaders and their followers and when they are not seen as achievable, motivation, enthusiasm and drive of people is severely, if not critically affected. We can do much better in aspiration department when it comes to safety. I am yet to hear of a zero organisational aspirational goal related to financial performance (zero losses) or productivity (zero downtime) or human resources (zero terminations) so why are we do this for safety? Maybe we should do what we do in those functions and be positive, truly aspirational to our workforce and copy aspirational statements we use to define our productive goals (e.g. world class suppliers of ..., leading industry producer of ...,etc.). There are so many positive and achievable aspirational goals and targets in safety; we need to use them in preference to those describing failures and absences.

It was not a perfect answer by a long shot, maybe a good try I suppose. There are so many other factors in this space. For the most part, zero ideology and its cousin, injury frequency rate, was created from our inability to reflect and understand safety as a presence of positives rather than

absence of negatives. Generations have evolved with this unconscious principle unchanged, as visible in the regulatory and private industry space. Despite huge progress and disruption by non-traditionalist thinkers, it appears that situation on the ground is unlikely to change unless regulatory bodies redefine this space with creation of universally accepted but industry specific, positive organisational safety performance lead indicators and abandon drive and use of lag statistical reporting as a primary measures of performance. At the very least, and as an immediate improvement, they need to redefine Injury Classification Standard and create a code of practice for classification of workplace injuries and link them to legislation to make it mandatory. From my angle, I would expect all regulators to depart from mere compliance, enlist help of safety professionals and create a set of key proactive safety drivers measuring presence of critical controls for each industry they regulate. Maybe we can then move from 'zero incidents and injuries' towards 'what are we doing for safety and leadership today', and 'how do we know our defences are working and effective' as a collective, organisational mentality.

I bet the success that follows will be like nothing we have ever seen in safety to date.



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