Dr. Dan Petersen was an industrial psychologist and arguably one of the most influential safety professionals in the areas of safety management and theory. Through years of research and working with companies throughout the world, Petersen determined that, although there was no one right way to manage safety, there were six criteria common to all organizations that were successful in creating a culture of safety, or in achieving safety excellence. Petersen’s Six Criteria for Safety Excellence provides a checklist of must-haves for any organization wishing to improve its safety culture.

The first four criteria focus on the specific roles and responsibilities of the various levels of the organization in creating a culture of safety, while the final two look at the overall safety management system. (See September 2014 – January 2015 issues of Aggregates Manager for articles about criteria 1–4)

Of all the criteria, #5 – System is flexible to accommodate the culture is the one that most organizations struggle to understand. Some flat out reject the notion of flexibility within their safety system.

A safety system

**Build a flexible safety management system that employees perceive positively.**

**Six Criteria for Safety Excellence**

- Top management is **visibly** committed.
- Middle management is **actively** involved.
- Front-line supervision is **performance-focused**.
- Employees are actively **participating**.
- System is **flexible** to accommodate the culture.
- Safety system is positively perceived by the workforce.
includes regulations, policies, procedures, processes, and accountabilities that all fit under the umbrella of culture. If you want your safety culture to continuously improve, you cannot have a safety system that is static. Expecting to improve your safety culture by following the same playbook that has caused you to plateau or stagnate is, as they say, the definition of insanity. Dr. Petersen suggested that an organization’s safety programs and culture have to evolve together.

We can use the safety meeting or toolbox process to demonstrate how a flexible safety system can improve the culture. In the aggregates industry, a brief safety talk led by a foreman or supervisor at some frequency is fairly common. What is also fairly common, unfortunately, is that these meetings tend to be “check in the box” activities, and no real value is provided to those who are supposed to benefit from them the most, the frontline employees. The following simplified step-by-step example demonstrates a proven process that organizations around the world have used to improve existing or create new safety activities. Let’s apply it to the “check in the box” safety meetings.

1. Seek out seven to nine volunteers within your organization who are safety-minded and respected by their peers to form a safety team. The majority of the volunteers should be frontline employees, with one or two supervisors. Since safety meetings are meant to keep those closest to the hazards free of harm, they (frontline employees) should have a say in what the safety meetings look like, and since supervisors are typically responsible for leading or facilitating those meetings, they, too, should be involved in improving the meetings.

2. With this safety team in place, start by finding out what doesn’t work with the current safety meeting process. Create a list of complaints, which might contain words or phrases like: boring, repetitive, too short, too long, can’t hear, read and sign, no recognition, no employee participation, no management participation, etc.

3. These documented complaints then become the team’s goals. How will we ensure our safety meetings are not boring, that employees participate, and recognition is provided on what we do safely? This is an exercise called “complaint equals goal.” The team has identified the current state of the safety meeting process, and now they are tasked with creating the future, desired state by creating solutions to their complaints. In establishing the improved safety meeting processes, the team needs to establish defined activities within the process that are clear, specific, and measurable. These become the accountabilities that, if followed, will ensure success. Each level of the organization must have its own set of defined activities that connect to the levels above and below them. An example of accountabilities for middle management might be to attend and participate in a safety meeting once a month and during weekly supervisor meetings ask open-ended questions on how the improved meeting process is going and what differences supervisors are seeing in employee participation.

4. After the safety team has established the improved safety meeting process, members will report out their efforts to the organization’s management team. The management team, or an existing safety steering team, should provide positive feedback to the safety team and support the improved process through implementation.

The process outlined above captures all of Dr. Petersen’s Six Criteria of Safety Excellence — engaging all levels of the organization, which is what I call an “engagement-based” safety system. There is much more detail to this continuous improvement approach to safety, but now you have a glimpse of an alternative process to consider when looking at ways to move your safety culture forward. Be advised, however, that Dr. Petersen cautioned leaders who decided to engage their employees in safety that, “Once employees have begun participating, it’s crucial that management live up to the guidelines it established, or it — and the safety program — will lose all credibility with the employees.”

The last of Dr. Petersen’s Six Criteria, #6 – Safety system is positively perceived by the workforce — can be considered the feedback loop. If your employees perceive the safety program or system as positive, it’s an indication that the first five criteria are being met. On the contrary, if the perception is negative, then there may be disconnects between various levels of the organization in how safety is being managed. The best way to gauge perception is to go out and ask, or to conduct a safety perception survey of all employees in your organization, from the production workforce to the president or company owner.

If you want to get the same results
in safety as you do in production, then you have to manage safety just like you do production, which was Dr. Petersen’s simple message. Do this by creating clear, specific, and measurable safety accountabilities for all levels of the organization, and actively engage as many employees as possible in the continuous improvement process. Much is owed to Petersen for his work in helping organizations save lives. With each organization that commits to applying the Six Criteria and continuously improving safety culture, his work lives on. AM

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Self-Assessment:

Does your organization meet Dr. Petersen’s Six Criteria for Safety Excellence? Is there room for improvement in creating a culture of safety excellence? Use the following questions to identify areas of opportunity:

- How do your leaders visibly demonstrate a commitment to safety?
- What safety expectations do middle managers clearly define for their direct reports?
- How do managers measure these accountabilities and recognize them accordingly?
- What are foremen / supervisors expected to do each day to prevent injuries and incidents from occurring? How do foremen / supervisors recognize employees for safe behaviors?
- How are frontline employees involved in improving existing or building new safety processes?
- How do frontline employees perceive your current safety culture?

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