



Workplace Safety

ASSP Safety 2019: Finding Common Ground Where Business and Safety Converge

Don Sears | Jun 14, 2019

Do you focus too much on the symptoms and outcomes of risk, such as injury data and total incident reduction? It might be time to go up a level or two into operational process. You could find important connections to business value which can elevate safety culture and help attain full executive buy-in.

Within a minute of talking to Peter Susca, founder of *OpX Safety*, he will tell you that safety is a leading indicator of business health. It's a pretty bold statement, but one he is intent on safety professionals really understanding—so that they can make a major cultural impact for their company regardless of the industry.

We interviewed Susca before his presentation at the American Society of Safety Professionals "*Safety 2019*" conference. "*It's Bigger Than Safety: Integrating OSH into the Business*" is intended to completely shift the mindset of safety professionals who may be narrowly focused on outcomes rather than the root cause of risk.

"Injuries are the last things you want to measure, literally," Susca says. "I talk to companies and I ask them, 'What's the last thing you want to have happen?' and invariably the answer is, 'We don't want anyone to injure anybody.' Ok. So why are we measuring injuries?"

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Safety: A Laser Focus on Outcomes Misses the Root Cause

During his presentation, Susca labels the OHS profession "Safety Island" and depicts the mainland as being the core business or financial engine. Safety, in his view, is viewed as a risk to financial health by the business—and mostly because it's a cost center and not a value or revenue center.

But there is a nexus—and it's squarely within operational process—and its direct ties to business health. Susca spent 20 years in the fire service working with hazardous materials training, the Fire Academy, and ended up at Hamilton Standard, and United Technologies, as a safety engineer and working on corporate safety management systems.

"You got to move upstream," Susca says. "What creates injuries? Whatever creates risk is what creates

outcomes, so to create a relationship between culture and outcomes, and everything in between, you need to connect the dots.”

What he means by operational process is the way manufacturers, energy companies and utilities go about doing work. How are operations tied to business health? Susca gives an example of consulting at an iron ore where he witnessed two maintenance workers grinding down rollers—and one guy’s holding the roller on a metal table while the other guy’s grinding the end with an angle grinder—with little use of PPE or safeguarding.

It didn’t look right. Rather than communicate safety protocol, Susca chose to ask why they were grinding rollers. The answer: They didn’t fit in their current process. Purchasing was buying the wrong items—but these guys think they are heroes for trying to solve the problem.

“It might be the way we go about hiring people, the way we go about maintaining equipment, or the way we go about educating managers or selecting supervisors—or even making a part or a product or delivering a service,” Susca says. “We would have never found out the real issue if we just said to these guys, ‘Hey, you need to wear some gloves and make sure you have a job hazard analysis,’ right?”

In his view, a safety-only perspective would have resulted in a Band-Aid fix such as a hazard sign instructing glove use, but the problem and the cause would not have been addressed. And the risk would still exist. Further investigation discovered many issues with purchasing across departments.

“What I have found in my experience is that there is a correlation between process risk, operational risk and safety,” Susca says. “A focus on the business risk within operations will help the business health—and the culture.”

Organizational Behavior Before Individual Behavior

For Peter Susca, organizational behavior or culture predicates individual behavior. An individual behavior supports culture. It's a cycle. But to break that cycle, you don't start with the bottom. You start with the top.

“We need to create a *decision-making culture* here that's healthy and balanced because when it's not balanced, we have excessive risk somewhere all the time,” Susca says. “Or the potential for unwanted outcomes.”

In most organizations with poor culture, good decision-making values are not prioritized. Good culture comes from making consistently good decisions based on what the organization believes it really wants to be.

“Without it, employees are making decisions on what they think works, or what they think is going to help avoid trouble, and all these decisions allow for too much variation—and risk,” he says. “And before you know it, you end up with disgruntled employees.”

Are You on Safety Island? Attention to Business Health Might Help

Here’s where the metaphor of safety island and the mainland comes in to focus, according to Susca. Safety professionals are often only working from the safety perspective out—and they need executive

buy-in to improve the culture overall and effectively.

How do you teach the safety manager to think like this? Susca's method is in his presentation—and also found in an article about the subject in ASSP's "Professional Safety" *column*, "Business Class."

The image is a big arrow pointing to the right in the background with five sections from the left to the right:

Culture > Management Systems > Processed and Programs > Risk > Outcomes

"If I want to be proactive and preventative, I'd want to start from the left (Culture) and move across all of these areas toward Outcomes, and I try and get safety professionals to think like this," Susca says. "But there's a problem: It's almost impossible because people don't think like this—they are problem solvers, they're fighting fires."

In Susca's experience, the only way to shift the cultural paradigm is that you have to move from your paradigm to theirs. Susca then flips the arrow to show it moving from left to right and to find the intersections—which is where business health and process issues meet.

"We're trying to get people to see and appreciate risk, the same way they appreciate outcomes, so they can act on the risk before it becomes an outcome," Susca says. "Because you can have a bad process and get good outcomes for very, very long periods of time, and still have a lot of risk."

The key is to focus on the right kinds of measurement—such as process health over outcome health. Over time, process health is a much better indicator and predictor of good or bad outcomes.

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Struggle with Executive Buy-In? You Won't If You Can Link Operations and Business

In Susca's view, the best way to get executives at the table is to talk to them, find out what they value for the business and take safety along for the ride. He brings up his example of the two maintenance workers grinding rollers to fit the process.

By eliminating many of the systemic purchasing issues, those two workers no longer have to grind rollers unsafely anymore. They might still need PPE for their job but they don't need to problem solve that issue anymore.

Sure, it sounds simple to fix the larger systemic issue, but how do you get a seat at the table? More learning. Again, to shift the paradigm, you have to work from an executive's paradigm, not yours.

"Why are you not at the table? Is it because they don't value safety? Or they don't value you? Do you know how to operate at that level? Don't take it personally, and go and help prepare yourself," Susca advises.

Find somebody who can help you understand how you need to build yourself to gain a position at the table, he suggests. "Then work on gaining financial knowledge, because financial knowledge is the language of the company."

Do you have executive buy-in for your safety program? How did you attain it?