

## Reflecting on Safety

### Assessing Safety Programs, Then and Now: Part 1 (Then)

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By Gary A. Higbee

How "good" is your safety program? Twenty years ago, I set out to answer that question by identifying five stages an organization passes through on its way to world class safety performance. I've seen a lot in 20 years and I've since refined my answer. Here's what I said back then. Next week, I'll give you the view I hold today.

#### Evaluating Safety Performance

Determining the quality of your safety program is a lot trickier than it might appear. Some people think it's a numbers game. They think if there aren't a lot of injuries and illnesses, then the program must be good. If there *are* a lot of injuries and illnesses, then the program must be bad.

If only things were that simple! Equating the number of accidents and illnesses with the quality of the safety program is confusing cause and effect. It also overlooks the role of luck - good and bad - in workplace safety.

The journey to attaining world class safety performance starts with a clear understanding of:

- Where you have been
- Where you are today, and
- Where you are going if nothing changes.

When you understand these things, you can determine the changes you need to make and the path to take to achieve your goal.

#### The Five Stages of a 'Good' Safety Program

Where is your program right now? There are five stages that organizations pass through. (Some organizations go through a combination of two at the same time):

##### Stage 1: Realization

This stage is marked by high injury rates and workers' compensation costs. Employees are at high risk of injury and the company at high risk of liability. The direct costs of lost time injuries eat away at profitability. All of these factors exert pressure on management to "do something." Audits are conducted to identify areas most in need of improvement.

##### Stage 2: Traditional

In this stage, companies make it a priority to develop policies and procedures. This is also when the education process begins. As yet, the organization has had no success in changing behaviors. Employees and management continue to do what's convenient without regard for safety. Steps taken to identify and address hazardous conditions have resulted in higher production and overhead costs. Machine maintenance and repair, shielding and guarding derive from a reactive - "we'll fix it when it's broken" - approach by management. Employees are still at high risk of injury but the company's liability risks have probably been reduced since obvious compliance problems have likely been addressed and workers' comp precludes employees from suing the company for their injuries.



Gary A. Higbee

[bio](#) | [email](#)

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### **Stage 3: Observation**

During this stage, management initiates an observation-based safety program in addition to the traditional program. Management is driving the improvement process with little to no employee involvement. Managers spend more time on the production floor or the worksite "observing" for hazards. Compliance is at the forefront of their minds and better documentation and record-keeping are a priority.

### **Stage 4: Empowerment**

Management and employees now share responsibility for assessing risks and preventing injuries. There's joint accountability in the education process. Employees have gained confidence in the management group and believe that safety is a core value of the organization. Employees drive improvement and are committed to company goals. Injuries fall. Employee observations have increased awareness of risk factors resulting in the development of 'habit strength' for effective safe behaviors. The gains made in safety are improving the company's financial performance. The company has gained a competitive advantage because the decline in lost time injuries has freed up resources for allocation to other parts of the business. Consequently, productivity and quality improve.

### **Stage 5: Utopia**

The company's safety culture is self-sustaining and developing. Employees are looking out for each other and peer-to-peer safety interventions are a normal part of the operation. The company is progressive in its approach to safety and has become a benchmark by which other companies in the industry measure their own safety performance.

### **Conclusion**

*Back to the present. As I noted above, I wrote this essay about 20 years ago. I've learned a lot since then. While I still believe in the five stages of progression, I now realize that my analysis wasn't complete. Something was missing. Next week, I'll explain what that missing aspect was when I present my "mature" view of how to access a safety program.*

**Editor's Note:** *You can get any and all of the previous installments of this series from the SafetyXChange archives.*

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