



SAFETY FIRST

# Is Safety Really Your Top Priority?

The answer may be in how you measure it

By Judy L. Agnew, Ph.D.

**M**ost companies say that safety is their number one priority<sup>1</sup>. Ask almost any organization and you'll find that not all employees agree. Management says the words "safety is number one" but the frontline population hears loud and clear that production, on-time performance, or customer service is number one. Is this a communication problem? Not in the typical sense. Often the signs, slogans, statements

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– Judy Agnew



and speeches communicate quite clearly that safety is number one. Unfortunately, management actions drown out the message. In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, “What you do speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say.”

Unintentional as they may be, there are many management behaviors that “speak loudly” about where safety is on the priority list. Classic examples can be seen in almost any company: repeatedly spending only a minute or two on safety and fifteen minutes on production in start-up meetings, measuring and providing feedback around quality or customer service each and every day while doing the same for safety only monthly, praising and celebrating good on-time performance even when safety short cuts were used. In safety, it isn’t just what is done; it is often the lack of action that creates a silence that naturally gets filled by other priorities. No mention of safety during a production

push, no reinforcement for safe behavior, no action on a hazard that was reported. What leaders do and do not do tells employees what the priorities are. What leaders say is often ignored if not backed up by action.

So why do supervisors and managers who truly care about safety behave in ways that contradict their values? Remarkably, how we measure safety is a primary root cause. Incident rate, lost time rate, severity rate and other lagging indicators are poor measures of safety. Such measures tell us

**Wise are those who learn that the bottom line doesn’t always have to be their top priority.**

— William Arthur

how many people got hurt and how badly, but they do not tell us how well a company is doing at preventing incidents. One of the reasons they are a poor gauge of prevention is that these numbers have what statisticians call natural variation. In other words, it is a statistical fact that if the yearly number of unsafe conditions and unsafe behaviors were held constant, an organization would experience a different number of incidents during the first half of a year and the last half (or from one year to the next). Thus, incident rates can get better or get worse with absolutely no change in safety conditions or behaviors. The result is that organizations, and departments within organizations, can go for long periods of time without incidents, despite having a less-than-safe work environment. This statistical fact works against keeping safety a priority. Managers and supervisors can do nothing around safety for a period of time and be reinforced with a good incident rate. Such is not the case for other business objectives like productivity, on-time performance, quality, etc. Those objectives tend to have much more sensitive





majority of measures should focus on proactive behaviors on the part of all employees—measures that track what people are doing daily to prevent incidents. When there are measures of what leaders do on a daily and weekly basis to prevent incidents, immediate and certain consequences can be engineered in to ensure those activities occur. Daily and weekly accountabilities will raise safety to an equal playing field with other business objectives and help make safety a priority for all.

To read more on the topic of ensuring safety is a priority, read *Safe by Accident? Take the Luck out of Safety—Leadership Practices that Build a Sustainable Safety Culture*.

measures and thus more immediate and certain consequences for management behavior. In the context of these other important business objectives (and their powerful consequences), it is easy for the well-intended manager or supervisor to put safety on the back burner. When the incident rate is low, one can assume all is well with safety and focus precious time on other priorities.

While there are many steps to build an effective safety culture, one where safety is truly a priority, a first step is to change the way safety is measured. While incident rate is a necessary metric, it should be one of several. The

<sup>i</sup> There is debate among some safety professionals about whether safety should be considered a priority or a value. The argument against calling it a priority is that priorities change, whereas values do not. Our position is that it matters little what you call it. What matters is what executives, managers, supervisors and hourly employees do to create and sustain a safe work environment. Simply changing safety from a priority to a value won't change anyone's behavior. Focus on behavior, not names.

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## [About the Author]

### JUDY AGNEW, Ph.D.



Judy Agnew is a recognized thought leader in the field of behavior based safety, safety leadership, safety culture and performance management. As senior vice president of safety solutions, Judy partners with clients to create behavior-based interventions that use positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. Judy has presented at major safety conferences, as well as other key corporate events. She is frequently interviewed for, and has been published in, national and trade publications. Judy is the author of three highly regarded safety books, *Removing Obstacles to Safety* (with Gail Snyder), *Safe by Accident? Take the Luck out of Safety* (with Aubrey Daniels) and, *A Supervisor's Guide to [Safety] Leadership*.

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