

Safety Leadership

Experts from BST weigh in on what current and future leaders need to know

Getting a seat at the table: 3 critical steps to safety as a strategy

EDITOR'S NOTE: Achieving and sustaining an injury-free workplace demands strong leadership. Throughout 2013, experts from Ojai, CA-based consulting firm BST will share their point of view on what leaders need to know to guide their organizations to achieve world-class safety performance.

By Colin Duncan

IT'S NO LONGER a secret that safety has a lot to offer organizations. We know, for instance, that organizations better at safety tend to perform better in other business functions as well. We also know that safety needs to have "a seat at the table" everywhere strategy is set, including the boardroom. But aside from a handful of progressive organizations, that "seat" isn't there. Why not?

It's not a matter of making the case. Many have done so, and the case is compelling. The real reason is that despite recognizing its value to the business, safety still largely acts and moves like a non-strategic function. For example, many organizations haven't learned to translate safety into terms recognizable to a board or how to map out a career path for a safety expert beyond regulatory management. To get a seat at the table, there are three critical things safety leaders need to do:

1. Talk about safety as a board-level issue. Many environmental, health and safety professionals are not having safety discussions at the highest levels because *they don't know how*. Historically, the language of safety – what we talk about and how – has been tactical. This is appropriate for running safety day to day, but not for integrating safety with the core of a business. Boards are concerned with risks to the enterprise, and leaders must be able to frame safety in terms that adequately articulate those risks.

Ask yourself: *What are the primary enterprise risks the board should be concerned about and why? What are the implications to the business if we continue our current level of performance? Are we at risk of having a catastrophic event? What can we learn from great safety organizations?* These types of "big-picture" questions are critical to identifying the right information to put in front of senior leaders. When you emphasize enterprise-focused topics over more generic material (e.g., presenting the organization's exposure to serious injuries and fatalities or the effects of safety on operational performance rather than the latest injury rates), you'll find you have a much more substantive discussion.

2. Adopt (or develop) a strategic framework. It's not enough to make a compelling case that safety is a board-level issue – you also need to provide an actionable road map. The right framework provides a system for understanding, measuring and mapping the maturity of every element of the business that drives performance. The framework should answer questions such as: *What drives safety performance? Where are we performing well and where do we need to improve? What would improvement look like?* A good framework helps the board track the nature and context of risk, as well as the organization's progress in mitigating it.

3. Add safety to your talent strategy. Safety will never truly have a seat at the table as long as executives depend on safety professionals to do all the heavy lifting. Boardrooms and C-suites need top-caliber leaders who can guide the discussion and ensure the risks to the business are adequately understood and addressed. Organizations must recruit and develop top talent into safety leadership roles and make safety posts an essential stop on the career path for high-potential leaders – in addition to developing leadership skills in its safety professionals. Executives proficient in safety can better position their boards to make decisions that limit risks, create opportunities, and improve both safety and organizational functioning.

Joining the conversation

The executive who leads safety has an obligation to initiate the strategy discussion for the benefit of employees and for the well-being of the enterprise. To get there won't be easy. The transition from tactical to strategic takes time and work to achieve. More significantly, it requires leaders to revisit old assumptions about what safety is and what it could be. ☺



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