

# Strategic commentary

## Why your best people have the worst safety practices – and how to fix it

*Thought leaders share their views on the HR profession and its direction for the future*

Garrison Wynn

Employers spend a lot of time trying to educate new or inexperienced employees on safety. At a basic level, it makes sense to view such employees as most likely to have an incident. Isn't it the doe-eyed Gen Y worker with a noticeable lack of urgency and the contractor who doesn't seem to know where he is who cause us the greatest concern?

The truth, as revealed in studies at least as far back as 1999, is that you've got to spend the most time with your best people and unleash that talent so it creates an overall culture of excellence. This idea, outlined in *First, Break All the Rules* by Marcus Buckingham and Curtis Coffman, comes from a Gallup study designed to uncover what the best managers did differently. The Gallup organization surveyed 80,000 managers and more than 1 million employees, ultimately to learn that your most talented people deserve more of your attention. And it stands to reason – after all, your best people have options and will leave if not properly managed [ . . . ] but the people who suck are with you for life!

My personal experience, from the oil and gas industry to manufacturing to

mining, gave rise to an observation that was underscored time and again: When it comes to safety practices, what worries me most are the superstars who have the attention of the masses and the blessing of confident but inattentive leaders.

Sydney Finkelstein, Professor at Dartmouth College's Tuck School of Business, conducted a six-year study of 51 notorious business failures. Detailed in *Why Smart Executives Fail*, the study delved into tendencies or behaviors that led to failed organizations under top executives and managers. The results showed that not only are intelligence, experience and confidence not enough to succeed, but they also can create a refusal to value outside input, cause red flags to be ignored and create a reliance on past success models that may not apply to a modern problem. The study's focus on the organizations' well-qualified leaders and their influence on employees would suggest that we're dealing with more than just the blind leading the blind. It would be more accurately described as people with 20/20 vision leading those who don't seem to even know the value of eyeballs!

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How are these findings relevant to your organization's safety culture? Your managers and supervisors might be intelligent, experienced and confident, but they also need not rely on past successes for the exclusion of new and better strategies for ensuring safety. Beyond managers and supervisors, these tendencies can be found across your entire safety environment! In other words, we can expect that the most skilled people in the field – those who have never had an accident – are often not naturally motivated to adopt the new safety features that could reduce the chances of a recordable incident. These talented senior workers may have many people looking up to them on the job site and copying their ways. They may be so focused and aware that it's possible they will achieve a perfect track record regardless of safe practices. However, the people training under them may be injured because they are not quite so skilled.

This presents a very bizarre situation that might get you scratching your hard hat. What we know to be excellence and effectiveness could be the root causes of failure. How can this be? The reality is that the tenured and the talented, those who are extremely successful on the job, are the most likely to view safety as a negative, in some sense. They see it as something that might prevent them from reaching their expected and deserved achievements. And no one is more driven to succeed than those who have consistently always succeeded.

So how exactly do you begin to teach your best employees the

horrible pitfalls of their amazing track records? It takes some specific communication tactics that not everyone has the willingness to apply. But if you do, it can make a dramatic difference.

#### **Step 1: Only the valued see value**

Solidify their expertise and let them know their existing knowledge is valuable. Remind them of the role they play and how it directly affects the company's overall success.

#### **Step 2: Brilliance is blinding**

Explain to your best employees that one of the most powerful traits of the most successful people on earth is the tendency to examine their own behavior and thinking process. Emphasize that sometimes our expertise and experience can cause us to overlook things that can be crucial to maintaining success.

#### **Step 3: Reverse views enlighten**

Ask them how they would handle the situation if they were in your position. Let them talk about how they would deal with it under the same circumstances. Allow them to advise you on what they would do if your roles were reversed.

#### **Step 4: Influence allows revelation**

Point out how ridiculous it is for all the talent and skill they have to be contributing to someone's potential for incidents. Clearly communicate that they should do things the safe way not just for their own safety but for the safety of all the people who look up to them and emulate their behavior. By modeling the proper

safety mindset they will also help the organization as a whole with productivity and profitability.

#### **Step 5: Ego injections are painless**

Explain to them that their influence is very valuable and there are people out there who need their experience and knowledge. Tell them you know that they'll have no trouble converting to the new safe way. As skilled as they are, it shouldn't take that much more time or effort to make the change.

#### **Step 6: Validation is an action**

After their behavior is changed – specifically, when they do things the safe way and have started teaching it to others – let them know how much you appreciate their efforts and give them public credit for the success.

As you take in the information presented here, perhaps you're thinking "That's a lot of effort and some serious butt-kissing to apply to those who never should have been a problem to begin with!". However, the only thing that makes your leadership look more ineffective than having your worst people screw up your safety record is having your best people do it.

#### **About the author**

Garrison Wynn is an author, consultant and keynote motivational speaker. He is the author of the book *The Real Truth About Success: What the Top 1 % Do Differently, Why They Won't Tell You, and How You Can Do It Anyway!* and *The Cowbell Principle*. Garrison Wynn can be contacted at: [alexandra@epicprgroup.com](mailto:alexandra@epicprgroup.com)