Pursuing Safety Excellence

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Introduction

In the early 1980's, a new study was published which outlined key success factors of America's best-run Companies (1). "In Search of Excellence" described eight basic principles that contributed in various ways to the long-standing financial well being of the sixty plus American corporations studied. These principles appear to be as true today as they were then. They become the foundation from which (safety) excellence can be grown, nurtured and sustained.

The Eight Principles

The eight (excellence) principles are:
1. Bias for Action
2. Close to the Customer
3. Autonomy and Entrepreneurship
4. Productivity through People
5. Hands on and Value Driven
6. Stick to Knitting
7. Simple Form and Lean Staff
8. Simultaneous Loose-Tight Properties

A *Bias for Action* may be summarized as "Ready, Fire, Aim". It is an inclination to do something (anything) to get the ball rolling. 'Analysis-to-Paralysis' is avoided at all costs. Projects are broken down into manageable pieces (chunking) and tasked to cross-functional teams for resolution and implementation. Organizations are simple in structure and focused on tangible results.

Close to the Customer is the second principle. Excellent companies treat their customers as special partners. They recognize that most innovation is driven by the needs of the customer and listening closely often creates new business opportunities. The most successful companies involve their customers in all phases of product development and test marketing.

Autonomy and Entrepreneurship emphasizes value systems that support small-scale experimentation. Heroes and success stories are kept alive by symbols, storytelling and other shared-value experiences. The business environment rewards innovation and regards failure as a learning experiment with the deep belief in the ever-increasing probability of success. The excellent culture encourages internal competition and many parallel experiments.

Productivity through People is based on the belief that the employees are the primary source of potential productivity gains. Positive reinforcement is preferred to ordinary monetary incentives to encourage people to contribute and innovate. Excellent companies make all their employees feel like winners. They believe that small is beautiful, and informal settings bring out the best in their (product) champions.

Hands On and Value Driven means that these organizations rely on many ways to communicate meaning and purpose in the day-to-day business. Once again, values are constantly reinforced through stories, myths, legends, and especially the "learning experiences". Institutional longevity comes down to maintaining the unique value set and a distinctive identity.

Stick to the Knitting simply means that a business should stay within their area of expertise (i.e. Utilities acquiring other utilities not an airline). Extensive research has concluded that non-directed diversification is a losing proposition. Businesses that branch out yet still stay very close to their core skill appear to outperform all their competitors.

Simple Form and Lean Staff depend on keeping things streamlined and uncomplicated. All the companies surveyed placed high value and priority on pushing things far down the line while preserving (maximizing) practical autonomy for large numbers of people. The American (span of control) management concepts rely more heavily on production directly from middle managers. The concept of Japanese span of control management is much flatter than their American counterparts and thrives on innovation emanating from 'where the action is'.

Simultaneous Loose-Tight Properties are perhaps the most intriguing of all. Loose tight is about giving people plenty of opportunities to 'scrounge up' experiments. Autonomy and experimentation are the rewards from exercising the discipline necessary to successfully cooperate within the shared value system that provides the framework.

Motivation

Dr. Ernest Becker, a psychologist and author, asserted that mankind is driven by an essential dualism. The simultaneous need for community, yet recognized for our individuality. People respond positively to fewer objectives rather than more. A clear and focused direction is far easier to buy into. But motivation consists of much more than primacy of direction.

Peer pressure can play a powerful role that seems to regulate and guide creativity and innovation consistent with the organization's values. *Positive reinforcement* is used far more frequently than monetary incentives. We all appreciate a little praise. Researchers have shown that when we are asked about ourselves we generally rank ourselves in the top percentiles. Giving positive feedback not only shapes a winning self-image, but reinforces it as well. People respect action, meaning, and self-control. Even the 'illusion of control' can be a very potent motivator. Simply stated, 'if people think (believe) that they have even modest personal control over their destinies then they will persist at their tasks'. Employees must truly believe in the mission if they are really going to be committed to it.

Leadership may be the most important motivational factor. The purpose of leadership is in large part to make conscious and active in what lies dormant in the unconscious of would-be followers. Leaders are able to inspire their followers, make real meanings, and instill a sense of purpose. Great leaders engender excitement, shape values, and build confidence.

Safety Culture

The effectiveness and vitality of a company's safety program is one way to assess its overall culture. Figure I illustrates the generally accepted (geometric) relationship between incident probability, frequency and severity (2). Stated simply, the more unsafe acts, behaviors and conditions that pervade, the more likely higher order

consequences will occur (i.e. near misses, injuries, and deaths). Interestingly, 96% of the incident precursors are unsafe acts and behaviors (3). In other words, we make many choices about our own health and safety behavior every day. So, what really motivates people to behave on behalf of their own well being? The thesis put forth here is that **the fundamental human motivation for sustaining a high level of safety awareness, active participation, innovation and continuous improvement by all employees is embodied in the on-going pursuit of excellence at all organizational levels**.

Behavior Based Safety (BBS)

Behavioral psychologists have carved out a 'science-based' safety management niche. BBS systems generally blend together Total Quality Management (TQM) and behavioral psychology concepts into an observation-feedback framework aimed at identifying at-risk work behavior, unsafe acts, specific root causes and proactive interventions (4,5).   A central theme of BBS is that a change in safety culture is really about a change in attitude. If you can change the attitudes, you change the culture. Moreover, *behavior* (external) change precedes *attitude* (internal) change (6). A core belief of BBS is that genuine culture change grows out of repetitious implementation at the front lines. Another perspective is that either attitude or behavior may be the dominant influence. Whichever occurs first, the other will inevitably follow in the effort to reconcile and align our attitude with our behavior (7). BBS systems are difficult to implement. The following are common pitfalls when introducing BBS (8):

·   A failure to train and educate all potential participants.
·   A lack of perceived (stakeholder) ownership.
·   An insufficient bottom-up involvement.
·   Invisible top-down support.
·   Insufficient (process) champions.
·   Commingling of goals and purpose.
·   Insufficient success *measurement* systems.

Enter Excellence

The eight principles of excellence when applied horizontally across an organization can serve as the foundation for success especially when it comes to creating attitude changes (Figure II). Excellence principles are of course most effective when endorsed and condoned by the top levels of management. The basics are predicated on a clear vision and shared value system that champions can count on to support a culture of continuous experimentation. The excellent company believes that many (small) experiments will eventually yield profitable products and services.

Safe Cycle 2000

The question really comes down to 'how does a business begin to incorporate the principles of excellence into (safety) culture'? Figure III is a representation of one such strategy (Safe Cycle 2000 model). The 'cycle' concept begins with the identification of critical employee (perception) issues. The next step is prioritization. The third step is the recruitment of *action champions* whose mission is to solve a particular problem. Management does not actively participate in the action forum phase but outwardly supports the process. The best solution(s) are formalized by the champions then subsequently implemented as designed by the forum. The results (and champions) are then positively acknowledged and the mutual success is communicated and celebrated all the way down the line.   The safe cycle can be used with any specific problem, issue or proposed corrective action. The key to success is rooted in the core belief that employees are the greatest business

asset and that they can and will work together to find innovative and high quality solutions to the most challenging (safety) problems.

Summary

In the 1982 book, "In Search of Excellence", the research team reviewed over sixty superior-performing American corporations. The eight excellence principles distilled from the findings become fundamental building blocks that can be directly applied to safety culture. The Safe Cycle 2000 model incorporates the concepts of excellence to prioritize problems and focus on their solutions. Employees are empowered to innovate, experiment and implement grassroots innovations within the shared value system. The excellent work environment recruits and rewards the product champions, which essentially represent all future opportunities for competitive success. The cycle model provides a straightforward venue to begin to infuse the proven principles of excellence into the organizational culture.

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