Commitment: The Key to Safety Leadership
The 21st century has given us cutting-edge tools and increased knowledge for improving safety, such as high-tech personal protective equipment and more effective management systems. However, investments in the best flame-resistant clothing, air-purifying respirators, and chemical-resistant gloves are only useful if people make a commitment to wearing them. Similarly, expertise in proven leadership practices can help you to be a better leader, but again, such practices are only beneficial if you make a commitment to use them. Behavior-based safety processes have been proven effective in reducing incidents and injuries but their effectiveness also requires an essential ingredient: commitment.

The key word is “Commitment”

Commitment is a critical contributor to safety programs at all organizational levels. For optimal performance, front-line employees need to commit to following through on their training and wearing PPE, while managers must commit to overseeing the safety process and promoting safety as the key organizational value. In fact, if you take a close look at industry research, those leaders who commit to the stewardship of the entire safety process clearly have the most impact on safety performance.

Unfortunately, not enough leaders have the tools they need to help them maintain their personal commitments. This can become a widespread and severe organizational problem because the lack of leadership commitment can cause workers to become complacent and safety initiatives to fail. Even if a company initiates a world-class safety process, without employee commitment, it will fail. This is especially true when the leaders are not visibly dedicated to the safety process.

Well-funded strategic safety systems and major safety improvement initiatives are falling short of corporate expectations. In many instances, they are failing dismally. Why?
What is Commitment?

To make a personal commitment means

“To act in the direction of what is most important to you even in the presence of obstacles.”

Let us drill down into this definition:

1. “To act . . .” – As you can see in the first two words of the definition, commitment requires action. Just talking about action is not committing. When it comes to safety, many people say they are committed to safety outcomes, but they often do not act safely or demonstrate safety leadership.

2. “. . . in the direction of what is most important to you . . .” – This part of the definition means that commitments are personally relevant. Long-term dedication is difficult to maintain if you do not have a reason to care about the process and the outcomes. Linking your actions to your own value system will strengthen your dedication to optimal performance.

3. “. . . even in the presence of obstacles.” – This last part of the definition reminds us that accomplishing important tasks is not simple or easy. When you set out to achieve a goal or begin a process, you can devise a plan to deal with complications, but inevitably, hurdles will arise. Committed action does not stop when you face difficulties. Acknowledging the obstacles in your path, and then working to solve them, is the hallmark of dedicated leadership.

Commitment in Safety Leadership

“I am willing to create and maintain a safe work environment as an ongoing process because the health and well-being of the people in the company are important to me. Even when difficulties arise, I will continue to work in a manner that reflects my values.”

If you agree with this statement, then you already have a solid foundation as a safety leader. However, making that kind of clear statement about your commitments is not enough. These words can act as a reminder to guide your actions, clarify your values, and motivate you through challenging times. However, actually keeping a commitment is more difficult that just making a statement. Commitments require a series of important additional components: values clarification, action planning, and applying “situational awareness” to your tasks. Let’s look at each of these three components.
Maturity is achieved when a person postpones immediate pleasures for long-term values.
~ Joshua L. Liebman

In business and industry, values are the guiding principles that allow us to achieve customer service, quality, employee engagement, and safety. An organization’s values ultimately lead to its profitability.

Leaders (and employees) want to believe that their personal values—such as honesty, integrity, and safety—coincide with those of their organization, and vice versa. They typically want their actions to reflect that alignment, although that is not always the case. Knowing what you value is important because your values can act as strong motivators for action, and can also guide your actions in the direction that is most meaningful, vital, and productive. Values drive patterns of behavior over a long period of time. They also help us set goals, whether we are aware of it or not.

Goals direct your attention to completing a task, and allow you to measure your progress. Clarifying values helps you choose your goals wisely and to determine the actions that will enable you to achieve those goals. In addition, when you clarify your values, you are more able to navigate obstacles in your path. For instance, if honesty is something that is vital to you, but something comes up where you stand to gain from being dishonest, then knowing and reflecting on your specific values can help you choose the appropriate behavior.

When it comes to your behavior as a safety leader, your motivation to choose actions that produce results and eliminate hazards is linked to how important safety is to you as a value. When you can articulate the values that are vital and important to you as a leader (and as an employee), you start to clarify the actions that exemplify those values. You can then begin to make and act on choices that lead to an injury-free workplace.
A commitment requires measureable action. Saying you plan to commit to behaving a certain way might kick-start your actions, but until you begin behaving in line with what you say, then you are only talking. Commitment requires visible, observable behavior. The specific actions that are required to execute a commitment must be clearly defined and supported by a system that provides constant feedback about your behavior.

You can do many things to ensure that your committed actions bring success. Setting up manageable and meaningful goals, creating checklists, making a contract with an accountability partner, and creating positive consequences for reaching milestones are fundamental components to a solid action plan. Highly successful people execute successful projects because of action planning. Abraham Lincoln said, “Give me six hours to chop down a tree and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.” A successful commitment to safety leadership requires you to hone your plan and to clearly articulate what measureable actions you are going to take in order to reach your goals.
Every step you make there’s just more and more distractions. There’s just more things that can go wrong and do go wrong. ~ Ricky Williams

So far, we have identified two key components for improving your safety leadership. When you know what to do (through action planning) and why you choose to do it (through clarifying your values), you give your leadership skills greater focus and purpose. Unfortunately, the workplace is filled with things that can distract you from doing the meaningful tasks you set out to do. A steady stream of interruptions takes your attention away from doing things you believe are vitally important.

Research suggests that for about 47 percent of the day, people do not have their mind on what they are doing. For much of the day, we are caught up in planning the future, recalling the past, or letting our mind wander while we are engaged in our work tasks. This lack of focus can become a major obstacle, throwing us off our commitments and significantly contributing to risky actions with dire consequences.

Developing situational awareness will help you manage these types of distractions. The more situationally aware you are, the more resistant you can be to obstacles that interfere with your actions. Leaders with greater situational awareness see their work environment more clearly, which helps pave the way toward more effective action. To put it simply, situational awareness is demonstrated when you are paying attention to your physical surroundings as well as your own personal thoughts and feelings. Learning to be mindfully aware of your work situation allows you to manage your behavior and focus your attention and vigilance rather than be unconsciously controlled by distracting thoughts. Situational awareness is a skill demonstrated by truly great leaders.

Situational Awareness

Component 3
Learn, Grow, Lead

“To act in the direction of what is most important to you even in the presence of obstacles.”

When you commit to being a safety leader, you must identify the critical actions that support key personal and organizational values in order to direct your actions. When you engage in values clarification, you will have greater motivation to direct your energy in the right direction. Situational awareness gives you the endurance and attention you need to stick to your commitments.

You can become a world-class safety leader when you
• clarify the values that are vital and meaningful to you
• link your values to specific and measurable actions
• learn the focusing skills of situational awareness
• mentally and physically carry out actions based on your values

In other words, world-class safety leadership requires commitment! These steps will help you act in the direction of what is important to you, even in the presence of obstacles. These steps will help you keep the vital and purposeful commitments you make as a safety leader in your quest for an injury-free workplace where everyone can go home safely to what is important to them.

About The Author

Dr. Daniel Moran is a Senior Vice President with Quality Safety Edge. He is co-author of “ACT in Practice”, a book focused on complex, applied behavior analysis, an author of numerous papers on behavior change and evidence-based education, as well as past-president of the Behavior Analysis Society of Illinois.

Dr. Moran’s 20 years of experience applying behavioral principles have enabled him to develop an innovative approach to building leadership commitment to safety improvement efforts — Commitment Based Leadership. Increasing commitment through the improvement of performance design, values clarification, and situational awareness has resulted in remarkable increases in job competence while also reducing work errors. Workshops designed with commitment-building principles have shown to increase a leader’s impact on productivity, and influence innovation skills in work groups.

Dr. Moran has integrated proven techniques and principles into an experiential workshop that improves safety leadership through stronger committed actions. This workshop has changed leadership skills in many industrial sectors such as oil and gas, manufacturing, paper and pulp, construction, and sales, both domestically and internationally. Accelerating committed actions toward safety, while reducing the personal obstacles to safety leadership, are vital to any workplace initiative.

“Dr. Moran’s training . . . has dramatically changed our company. Within a week of Dr. Moran’s training, our crews decided to have two safety meetings every shift. The second meeting was so they could review the day’s work and help plan for the next shift, making sure that every learned lesson of the day was communicated. Within six months, our crews began frequently quoting Dr. Moran’s sessions. I believe that Dr. Moran has developed a concept and a teaching method that will revolutionize the construction industry. Dr. Moran has taught our employees to say and believe “I am here . . . committing to safe behavior because of the value I have in the things that are important to me.”

~ Steve Turner, Corrosion Monitoring Services
A Pioneer in Behavior-Based Safety

Quality Safety Edge (QSE) is a pioneer in behavior-based safety with more than 25 years of proven results. Founder and President, Terry McSween, Ph.D., is recognized as one of the world’s leading authorities in behavior-based safety. He has written the seminal text and over 100 published articles on behavior-based safety. Staffed with Ph.D. behavioral psychologists and safety professionals, Quality Safety Edge has the expertise to provide you with the depth and experience required to implement original solutions.

Customized to fit your organization

Many organizations attempting behavior-based safety struggle with unsuitable “off-the-shelf” processes. Although the core components of behavior-based safety are misleadingly simple to understand, adapting those components for diverse environments requires careful planning. This ensures that the elements integrate well with your organization’s culture. Our team works collaboratively with you to design unique behavior-based safety solutions that fit your unique environment.

Ways we can help you

- Values Based Safety®
- Readiness assessments
- BBS Essentials® for small companies
- AlertDriving
- Serious Incident Prevention™
- Commitment Based Leadership®
- BBS health assessments
- Internal facilitator training
- Educational workshops
- Speaking engagements
- BBS data-management systems
You know your business. We know behavior. Together we can design systems to ensure a safer, more productive and profitable workplace.

Experience

With over 1,200 implementations worldwide, in almost every type of business and industry, our consultants and project managers are particularly well suited for various cultural and organizational environments.

A Global Reach

A global economy is no longer a future vision, but a reality . . . many will argue a necessity. However, doing business internationally now requires much more than mutual commerce; it requires in-depth customer and cultural knowledge. Quality Safety Edge has applied that knowledge to help clients in 27 countries achieve world-class safety cultures.

Industries we have worked with include

- Construction
- Chemical Process plants
- Defense contractors
- Electric Utilities (including generation and T&D)
- Heavy equipment
- Maintenance
- Manufacturing
- Oil & Gas production and exploration
- Oil & Gas Pipelines
- Refining
- Warehousing & Distribution
- Health care
- And many others!