



WHITE PAPER

## Safety Strategy: 5 Questions to Ask and Answer to Get Safety Right

Many leaders have historically approached safety as a tactical activity. They ensure that competent safety experts and systems are in place and provide financial and other resources as necessary, reviewing incident data in monthly meetings. If the performance data indicate no exceptional activity, they move on to the next item on the agenda. If the data skew beyond an expected range—or heaven forbid, a serious incident or accident occurs—the leaders deploy someone to analyse root causes and ‘fix it’ and then things gradually return to normal.

As we have learned working with leaders throughout industry, comprehensive safety excellence—where every aspect of EHS is performing optimally and informing and supporting the others—simply can’t be achieved through tactical activities alone. That kind of performance will come about only through a strategy that is driven from the top and engages everyone in the organisation.

This document describes the role of safety strategy in performance improvement and offers questions leaders must be able to ask and answer in order to guide strategy development process and execution.

## Understanding Strategy

How often have you asked someone—or been asked yourself, “What is your organisation’s safety strategy?”

Consider what you are really asking for . . . a vision, a strategy, an execution/improvement plan? It is important to understand the role of each of these three elements in the successful achievement of superior **safety performance**. Typically the process begins with the development of the enterprise vision, which drives a multi-year strategy to achieve the desired future state and annual improvement plans coherent with the strategy. There must be clear linkages at all of these levels if an organisation is going to be successful.

Strategy is defined as a plan or a technique for achieving some end. In this case the “safety strategy” is defined as the plan for achieving the **organisation’s safety vision**.

A clear and coherent strategy helps leaders do a number of things, including:

- > Help everyone see where the organisation is moving;
- > Allow everyone to see and understand their role within the strategy;
- > Allocate limited resources against the most impactful activities in support of the vision;
- > Allow the organisation to maintain focus against the plan;
- > Provide clear, measurable indicators of success, that are both activity—and outcome-based; and
- > Provide a process for course correction over time as additional knowledge and results are available.

The one thing that is a given is that “failure to plan equals plan to fail.” This statement could not be truer as it relates to safety.

Often, when leaders approach creating a strategy for safety, they like to jump right into action with objectives. They may focus on achieving specific outcomes such as improved employee engagement or performance against industry benchmarks. Leaders may also set targets for more upstream outcomes such as increased first-aid and near-miss reporting, increasing employee confidence in pausing work, or reducing the number of incidents with serious injury or fatal exposures. But establishing targets will have little impact if they aren’t tied to an actionable framework that lays out how these goals will be achieved.

When it comes to success, slower is faster. We need to know more than just the objective. We also need to define the steps it will take to get there. Organisations dramatically increase the depth of

success and sustainability if they take the time and put in the energy to developing a fully integrated strategic safety plan.

To begin understanding what it takes to develop a great safety strategy, it is helpful to ask and be able to answer five key questions.

## 1. What Are We Really Trying to Achieve?

True safety improvement doesn’t just focus on one area or aspect of safety—it works to create excellence using all the elements of EHS to create cultures that care for people, processes, plant and equipment. For that reason, an effective strategy is fully integrated and covers a range of disciplines, including:

- > Control of work systems
- > Organisational safety
- > Employee, Contractor, Public
- > Process safety
- > Workforce Engagement
- > Leadership

As part of the development process, all of these components must be considered, not only as stand-alone items, but also as to how they will influence each other. Understanding of this interconnection is critical in determining the sequence and frequency of actions needed to be taken.

## 2. What Are the Obstacles in the Way of Hitting Our Targets? What “Success Factors” Can Help Us?

If we consider the targets mentioned above—or any other safety objective—there are a number of organisational elements and factors that could hinder or prevent success. These elements and factors include:

1. The type of safety data and analysis available, metrics tracked, and how this information is leveraged;
2. Leadership’s role in the change effort and in safety;
3. Cultural attributes that affect the level of employee engagement and commit;
4. Alignment of performance management systems to the desired outcomes;
5. The effectiveness and level of acceptance of the existing safety systems;
6. The organisational reporting structure;
7. The focus and structure of the safety organisation; and
8. Other factors like fatigue that can influence risk-taking behaviour.

We can argue about the feasibility of the targets, but the one thing we need to recognise is that these targets will not be achieved without a sound plan. What is needed to achieve any safety objective is a strategy that:

- > Identifies all elements that need to be impacted to achieve the strategy;
- > Identifies the obstacles to success and the steps to be taken to overcome these obstacles;
- > Identifies the issues and influences that might deter people from committing to the change effort;
- > Leverages organisational strengths; and
- > Lays out an improvement plan in significant detail to assure that leadership understands the commitment in time and resources necessary to achieve the desired objectives.

### 3. What Will a Good Strategy Look Like?

Typically, a cross-functional team comprising operational, non-operational, and safety professionals creates the strategic direction using a vision for the desired future state as its guiding principle. The senior safety leadership team reviews and approves the strategic plan and provides routine governance oversight as it is implemented.

A safety strategy can take many formats, but typically includes the following elements:

- > Every component of EHS;
- > Clearly defined SMART objectives for each component;
- > Identification of the sponsor for the change initiative;
- > Identification of the owner for each objective;
- > As **assessment** and review process using plan/do/check/act methodology;
- > Methodology for developing the plan;
- > Initial and on-going communication plan; and
- > A continuous improvement plan and methodology.

In the roadmap for how an organisation can successfully move from a current state to a desired future state, leaders must also consider the duration of a safety strategy. The length varies depending on the scope and magnitude of the change. However, most commonly at the site level, safety improvement plans, which are a version of a safety strategy, typically cover one year, while a corporate safety strategy might outline activities and efforts that will occur across a time span of three to five years.

Another element of the safety strategy process is the review and updating cycle. Even though the safety strategy is typically a multi-year document, it must be reviewed and updated annually, taking into consideration the lessons learned over the previous 12 months.

### 4. Once We Have a Strategy, How Will We Execute It?

Safety improvement is fundamentally a change management process. Leaders must ensure that employees (managers, supervision, and floor employees) are inspired to move toward the future state, understand the plans and what is being done to achieve the change, that the change is monitored through checks and balances, and that recognition and reinforcement takes place. In other words, it's not enough to have a strategy by itself, you also need a governance structure to ensure those elements are taking place.

### 5. Who Owns the Strategy?

What distinguishes a strategic approach to safety from a more tactical approach is, specifically and unavoidably, the actions of the leaders. What leaders do—what steps they take and what words they speak—will either lead to a sustained change or a wave of activity that comes and goes without lasting impact.

As with any significant strategic change, achieving safety excellence requires a hands-on role for senior managers. Most leaders are familiar with the role of safety spokesperson—they're comfortable in the pulpit, being the cheerleader for safety. They acknowledge they must allocate resources, both time and financial, to overseeing the transformation they seek. They know they are responsible for developing and communicating the vision, identifying appropriate leading and lagging metrics, evaluating the current state, and identifying gaps between where they are today and where they want to be. They know they must develop and oversee the execution of plans to close the gaps and then ensure it all stays on track and is sustained.

Realistically, however, members of the senior leadership team can't do all of this without support. Leaders must enlist and engage others throughout the organisation in driving the change, assuring clear roles and responsibilities and oversight.

## Achieving What's Possible

Most of us have had experience with change programs that start with great promise and then fade away over time. Speeches are made, processes are reengineered, and recognition plans are launched. But after the initial gains, the focus of the organisation begins to shift to other priorities. The early progress begins to drift back to the pre-intervention levels, managers become distracted, and the perception is reinforced that employees can, once again, wait out this “flavour of the month.”

Achieving safety excellence is like bending wood. Apply heat and pressure and the wood will bend. Sustain the pressure long enough and the wood will stay bent. But remove the pressure before the change is fully integrated into the fibres of the wood, and it will snap back. A well-defined safety strategy provides the framework for leaders to create more and more followers over time and thereby achieve an organisation with consistent and comprehensive safety excellence.

### DEKRA Organisational Reliability

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