

FOCUS ON LEADERSHIP AND SAFETY WILL FOLLOW

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In the quest to improve safety, organizations often rely on motivational posters, classes or training programs to help teams minimize risk and improve safety performance. However, great safety records are not achieved through these efforts alone. Improving safety requires leadership – leadership at the front lines that is equipped to develop a process-oriented and disciplined safety-in-execution culture. The secret is training those front-line leaders in a simple, scalable process. The pursuit of operational excellence through such leadership training is the key to improving safety.

I have always believed that the most operationally-capable organizations are also the safest. Great leadership at the operational level makes organizations excellent. And, it is that same leadership that makes these organizations the safest.

In 2007, I was the commanding officer of a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. That year, our ship won numerous awards, including an award for being the most battle-ready aircraft carrier in the Atlantic Fleet, winning prestigious safety awards and being selected Ship of the Year. We also won three environmental awards and had high retention numbers. We were forward deployed in a time of war; yet we achieved the highest safety ratings. Operational excellence and safety are not contradictory pursuits. They are both the product of an obsession for continuous improvement, not just in the C-suite or boardroom, but where the work is being done. In the Navy, we call this “deck plate leadership.” We – and I mean “We” the senior leaders onboard our ship - were able to achieve all of this by concentrating on developing leaders, improving day-to-day operations, and closing execution gaps.

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Flawless ExecutionSM to Improve Safety Levels

Good leaders create an environment and model behavior that is conducive to achieving mission objectives. In order to improve day-to-day operations and close execution gaps, leaders must align their teams and build trust on a daily basis. If you focus on improving the day-to-day basic operations of your organization you will find that your safety record will improve as a result. There are two principle reasons for this two-fold improvement. First, one must plan well before for every task, project, or undertaking. Planning does not have to take a lot of time. But, it does have to incorporate all the right elements and be performed in the same disciplined manner every time. Second, teams must

assess how well they performed once their plan is executed. Did the team succeed, fail, encounter new challenges, or suffer a near miss? We call such an assessment debriefing. Debriefing is how we learn from doing and improve every day. Without these basic principles, organizations simply cannot maintain operational excellence and safety. Your operations may appear as if they are safe. But, in the long run, you are putting your team at risk.

To improve safety, leaders should follow the Flawless ExecutionSM process of Plan, Brief, Execute, and Debrief on a daily basis. Leaders must implement an organization-wide planning process that is simple, scalable at all levels – whether planning at the highest organizational level or for the simplest daily tasks.

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Then they need to communicate that plan through briefing. It's important that the leaders brief what they're going to do that day. Formal briefings inform participants of the plan; each individual's roles and actions within that plan; develop Situational AwarenessSM; and align the immediate objective with those of the team or organization's longer range objectives.

During execution, leaders must hold individuals accountable via a series of short, focused team meetings in which each member is held responsible for his/her duties and execution gaps are identified and acted upon – these meetings ensure that the team remains aligned and focused. It's important to establish a rhythm of execution in any organization – one that habituates team members to a regular pace of operations so that they know when to expect to perform each of the four steps in the Flawless Execution process. That rhythm provides periodic, expected leadership intersection points that nurtures the discipline needed for both

the front line workers and the deck plate leaders to improve operational and safety excellence.

Finally, the debriefing process allows leaders to create trust with nameless and rankless debrief sessions in which team members develop lessons learned from the execution process. Those lessons learned should be applied to future operations. Leaders should also have a conduit to spread lessons learned throughout the entire organization. Transferring these lessons to the whole organization improves performance and increases safety by accelerating the team's experience.

Leaders must drive the cultural adoption of this Plan-Brief-Execute-Debrief process by applying it to day-to-day operations. Adoption of the Flawless Execution process will effectively close the execution gaps in your organization, which will ultimately improve your safety – and your productivity. Therefore, it is

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imperative that organizations teach leaders, at all levels, the tools, processes, and techniques that they need to achieve operational excellence.

Leadership and Responsibility to Improve Safety

It is a leader's job to make sure that their team is aligned, and that each member is communicating, working towards the same goal, and executing in the same manner. A great leader does not simply watch from afar, commanding others. Instead, a great leader's responsibility is to go down to the front lines with his/her team, whether it's an oil rig, a paper plant, or a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, motivating and aligning individuals to accomplish what they're supposed to, every day. By aligning teams, improving trust, and focusing on day-to-day operations, great leaders will close execution gaps and finally achieve high safety levels.

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