

Workplace Safety: The Leading Edge of a Culture of Accountability

By David Maxfield, author of *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything*

“What do you want me to do—save money or save lives? You can’t have it both ways.” This quote comes from a frustrated manager who feels whipsawed by these competing values. Of course he knows the company line, “Safety comes first,” but then he adds, “But we’re not in business to be safe. We’re in business to build product.”

Many organizations face this challenge: they value safety, but maintaining a safe workplace often provides little strategic advantage. It’s easy to find ROI reasons to fund productivity, quality, and efficiency, but safety is a cost center. Of course, there are business reasons for maintaining a safe workplace. Injuries are costly, and in some industries a poor safety record can disqualify you for new bids and contracts. But in most organizations, workplace safety is more about values than it is about business.

At VitalSmarts, we have spent the last several years studying organizations that have “broken the code” on safety—firms that have extraordinary safety records—and we have an amazing discovery to report. First a bit of background.

We were working with Mike Wildfong, general manager at TI Automotive a firm with an exceptional safety record. Mike and his team maintain an obsessive focus on keeping people safe, and we asked him why. Here’s how he explained it, “I use safety as the leading edge of accountability. We need accountability to achieve the quality, productivity, and cost targets we set. But I start with safety. If I can’t achieve accountability around safety, then I can’t achieve accountability around anything.”

Mike and the other safety-focused executives we studied use safety as an accountability incubator. They build a culture of accountability, where everyone holds everyone accountable for safe practices. The brilliant leap they make is that once you’ve achieved this level of accountability around safety, you can employ it to improve quality, productivity, cost control, customer service, EVERYTHING!

So Mike and his peers deny there’s a tradeoff between saving money and saving lives. They argue for the reverse. In their experience, it’s not whether you hold people accountable for saving money or for saving lives. It’s whether you hold them accountable or NOT! They believe managers who hold people accountable, succeed at everything—safety, quality, productivity, etc. And likewise, managers who don’t hold people accountable, fail at everything.

We put this idea to the test by examining 420 supervisors and managers, divided into two groups. The leaders in the first group were selected because they held their people accountable for every aspect of safety. The leaders in the second group were selected because they did not. We wanted to test whether there were tradeoffs between safety and other priorities or whether accountability in safety predicted success across all priorities.



The findings couldn't be more dramatic. When we compared the 20 percent of leaders who focused the most on safety to the other 80 percent, these safety-focused leaders were five times more likely to also be in the top 20 percent on productivity, quality, efficiency, and employee satisfaction.

Our data clearly show that being the best in workplace safety makes you the best in each of these other areas. And these results held true across industries as different as oil & gas exploration, chemical manufacturing, power generation, and construction. Regardless of the industry, the leaders who are best at holding their people accountable for safety also achieve the best quality, productivity, and efficiency.

This study shows the strategic importance of the norms, skills, and behaviors involved in accountability. It's clearly an area every leader should master. But what does it mean to master accountability?

Accountability is not about Blame and Punishment

Some leaders believe accountability is all about blame and punishment. Find the guilty party and sanction them. Is this what our high-accountability leaders were doing? To find out, we measured each leader along two dimensions.

1. The analytical side of accountability: Did the leader tend to analyze safety problems by *singling out & blaming* or by *diagnosing & understanding*?
2. The interpersonal side of accountability: Did the leader tend to resolve safety problems by *threatening & punishing* or by *explaining & involving*?

Our high-accountability leaders were 3.4 times more likely than the rest to emphasize explaining & involving and diagnosing & understanding techniques when faced with safety concerns. They round throughout their operation to discover problems, speak up when they have concerns, diagnose the causes of problems, reach decisions on solutions, and follow up to ensure success. Many used quality tools like the "5 Why's" and communication training tools like Crucial Conversations to understand and address accountability issues that if left unresolved, led to an increase of errors and accidents. Perhaps this is why these high-accountability leaders also lead the pack in employee satisfaction.

Randy Arnott, the director of Environment, Health, & Safety at Cree Industries describes what he sees when one of these high-accountability managers moves into a department: "The first thing you notice is that the area is cleaner. Equipment and tools are in their places, and the floor is clear of raw material, cables, and hoses. Next, you see a flurry of maintenance. Machines that have been hobbling along, requiring extra attention, are either fixed or removed. Then you begin to see process improvements. Process flows are rationalized and streamlined. With each of these steps the new leader is driving improvements in safety, quality, productivity, and costs."

These high-accountability leaders apply quality and communication principles and tools, rather than blame and punishment. For example, they use performance data to locate problems; use tools from Six Sigma, Lean Manufacturing, and the Toyota Production System to diagnose problems; and then, they

use a variety of communication skills to hold people—operators, maintenance, engineering, and their own managers—accountable for implementing solutions.

Build a Culture of Accountability

In some organizations, a good excuse can substitute for good performance. There is more finger pointing than accountability. In these firms it's the exceptional leaders who accept and demand accountability. But imagine what can be accomplished with a culture of accountability—an organization where every leader and every employee feels ownership for results and holds one another accountable.

Every organization strives to create this culture of accountability. But it's incredibly challenging. The mistake most leaders make is to rely too exclusively on a single source of influence—a training program, an incentive system, or a promotional campaign—to drive the change. These leaders quickly find the status quo exerts more gravity than they realized. The culture may budge a little, but is soon pulled back into the familiar orbit with all its blame games, finger pointing, and other low-accountability behaviors.

The reason the status quo is so hard to change is that the world is perfectly organized to produce the current results. The status quo doesn't stem from a single root cause, but from multiple root causes. These causes include personal values and skills, social norms and practices, and organizational incentives and structures. We group these causes into six sources of influence, described below:

1. **Personal Motivation:** Holding others accountable must be a moral imperative. People need to find meaning and take pride in their ability to hold others accountable.
2. **Personal Ability:** People need the skills required to diagnose and understand the root causes of problems. They also need the communication skills required to explain and involve, instead of threaten and punish.
3. **Social Motivation:** Social norms must encourage, rather than punish, people when they try to hold others accountable. The organizational culture needs to expect and demand accountability.
4. **Social Ability:** People must be able to count on support from their managers and peers when they try to hold someone accountable.
5. **Structural Motivation:** The formal reward system (performance reviews, pay, promotion, and perks) needs to encourage, rather than ignore or discourage, accountability.
6. **Structural Ability:** There need to be established times, places, forums, and tools that make it easy to hold others accountable.

It's common to find barriers to accountability in each of these six sources of influence. Sometimes multiple barriers exist within a single source. Creating a culture of accountability requires addressing each of these barriers and building positive support within each source. Our research shows that initiatives are ten times more likely to succeed when leaders combine four or more of these sources of influence.

So, creating a culture of accountability will be difficult, and requires a multifaceted approach. But many of the exceptionally safe organizations we've studied have discovered the path to this culture—that path begins with workplace safety.

Workplace Safety as the “Leading Edge” of Accountability

Which organizational priority has the greatest personal value for you? Is it cost control, customer satisfaction, productivity, quality, or workplace safety? Or is it the firm's profitability or shareholder equity? The respondents in our study were clear. Nearly half selected “workplace safety,” more than twice as much as the runner up, customer satisfaction.

It shouldn't be too surprising that people come to work already caring about their own personal safety and the safety of their teammates. And yet, it's this personal motivation that's the missing ingredient in most of the culture-change efforts that fail.

Here is the challenge. When the behaviors required in the new culture are not personally motivating, then leaders have to rely on external incentives or even punishments to keep them going. And, if the firm ever lets up on enforcement, then people stop the new behaviors, because *they don't like doing them*.

So, a major barrier to creating an accountability culture is that most people don't like holding others accountable, and they don't want to. Managers say it's the least favorite part of their jobs, and employees say, “If I'd wanted to have to hold people accountable, I'd have become a manager.” But workplace safety is an area where the organization can connect to values that are already deeply held by their employees.

People don't invest themselves in just any cause. After all, these moral investments define who we are. Taking ownership for a set of results is an act of self identity that engages our ethics, morals, and passions. Research shows we are far more willing to invest ourselves in causes that involve human consequences. And this is especially true when we have a personal relationship with the people who are impacted. Few employees invest themselves in abstract results such as share prices, productivity numbers, or returns on investments. But they can become passionately invested when the results involve their own personal safety and the safety of their friends and co-workers.

Safety is also an area where social pressure can be applied. Back to Mike Wildfong, “How is anyone going to object to safety? If you come to me and say you don't want to be held accountable for keeping people safe, that's a major tell. You're signaling you don't want to be held accountable, period. That you don't want to be on the accountability bus.”

Steps Leaders Can Take

This research clarifies several steps leaders can take to build a culture of accountability within their organizations.

First, leaders must recognize the central role accountability plays in achieving every other priority.

When peers look out for each other, watch each others' backs, and hold each other accountable, it supercharges everything the organization strives to accomplish.

Second, leaders should build a culture of accountability that begins with workplace safety.

Additionally, within safety, the high-accountability leaders we studied took special care to build personal motivation. They took special care to connect accountability to the personal values related to workplace safety.

Below are a few examples of how leaders made this connection. Notice they avoid data dumps, lectures, sermons, and rants. Verbal persuasion is the least powerful way to connect to values. Instead, they used field trips, face-to-face meetings, and powerful stories.

- Francis Price, the CEO of Q3 Industries, takes his senior team to the hospital whenever an employee is injured. They spend time with the injured worker and his or her family. They create a personal relationship and experience the harm the injury has done.
- Mike Wildfong, the GM of TI Automotive, asks the injured worker's team members to collect donations and to bring them to the injured person's home. The visit brings home the broad and lasting effects of an injury.
- Randy Arnott, the Environment, Health, & Safety Manager at Cree Industries, arranges for injured employees to meet with their teams and describe what happened during their accident and the impact the injury has had on their lives. Co-workers often realize that luck is all that separates them from their injured teammate.
- Gerry Klimo, an instructor with the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, brings Sean George, a disfigured accident survivor, to speak to workers, insurance companies, and others in the construction industry. He finds that meeting and talking with an injured survivor creates compelling levels of motivation.

Third, leaders need to define the vital behaviors involved in "accountability." These are the two or three clearly defined actions that capture the essence of what accountability means. Examples include:

"I speak up and hold people accountable for creating and maintaining a safe workforce, regardless of their role or position."

"When I have concern that someone is being unsafe or creating unsafe conditions, I take action to make sure the problem is addressed—first by speaking directly and respectfully with the person, and then, if unsuccessful, by escalating to those who should be responsible."

As Mike Wildfong says, "Every manager, supervisor, and employee needs to sign up to ride this accountability bus."

Fourth, leaders should focus on a handful of crucial moments—times and circumstances when it’s especially important to speak up and hold others accountable. Our research study, *Silent Danger: The Five Crucial Conversations that Drive Workplace Safety*, identifies five of these crucial moments that have a disproportionate impact on safety. When leaders focus their efforts on this handful of crucial moments, instead of spreading themselves too thin, they can achieve rapid improvements.

Fifth, leaders need to marshal a critical mass of all six sources of influence. The high-accountability leaders we studied aimed all six sources of influence at improving the two or three vital behaviors in the handful of crucial moments. They added an overwhelming combination of training, incentives, structural changes, and social support to the personal motivation that was already there.

Finally, we were surprised to find a number of firms that have achieved remarkable advances in workplace safety, but then failed to transfer this success to their quality, productivity, and cost control initiatives. This failure to transfer seems to stem from two quite different causes. We’ve found that some organizations have achieved improved safety through better systems and tools, but haven’t really built an accountability culture. Often, their safety improvements, while dramatic, top out well before they achieve a completely safe workplace. There really is no tool or process that can replace total accountability.

Other times, successes in safety don’t transfer, because leaders don’t understand what made their safety program so successful. Often they used all six sources of influence with workplace safety, but used only two or three sources in their other initiatives. Still other times, leaders think accountability in one area will transfer automatically to every other area. Of course it will for some employees, those who see the connection. But most will either fail to see the connection or wait for permission to hold their peers and bosses accountable for quality, productivity, and cost control. These employees aren’t sure it’s what the organization wants. In these cases, leaders need to make the connection clear and compelling.

In summary, we believe many safety and other priorities have been constrained by the outdated and inaccurate belief that you can’t have it all. Once leaders understand that accountability is the operating system that drives all of their applications—safety, quality, productivity, cost control, etc.—they can stop pitting one priority against another, and work to achieve a culture of accountability that supports bottom-line metrics across the board. And it’s especially rewarding that the first step along this path to success is one that also saves lives. Who can’t get on that bus?