

## Why Safety Competes with Production, and What to Do About It

by Shawn M. Galloway

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Safety, quality and production are competing priorities in most organizations. Rather than more company messaging, first focus on the experiences of the workforce to change perceptions. Today, more than ever, corporations work aggressively to change how safety is perceived and valued within day-to-day decisions. "Safety first," "safe production," "safety is a value," "safety is a way of life," and "there is no job so important we can't do it safely," are phrases messaged throughout countless companies all with good intent to influence employee actions, but they never fully do the job.

Values are created within an organizational culture when specific beliefs are reinforced at or near the point of decision. Following is a model taught to clients, outlining how cultures are formed and how they influence new members. Individuals join a company with existing perceptions about safety. Perhaps their last place of employment was very mature in safety thinking or perhaps not. These perceptions create attitudes about the importance of safety.

Attitudes, in turn, lead to the creation of values both within the person and work group. These values shape the decisions an individual will make when presented with the opportunity to, for example, stop production or a task because of a safety concern. Prior to carrying out these decisions and behaving in a specific manner, the individual has an expectation of the experience that will follow the action. If the outcome is in-line with the expectation, the workers will not make a big deal out of it, nor talk about it, because it is what was expected.

However, if a great, unexpected experience occurs, like how the supervisor or manager responds, some storytelling to peers might occur. Unfortunately, the more negative the experience, the louder the stories are told that either confirm or conflict with the individual's perception. The stories are more significant and influential than the messaging of the corporation that safety is just as, or more important than, production. Individuals within a culture are actively on the lookout for examples (i.e., experiences, stories) that confirm or conflict with the stated priorities or values.

Hundreds of consulting projects have yielded many examples where company leaders have actually demonstrated that safety is either a top priority or at the same level of production. Unfortunately, most of the time the leaders are more aware of these stories than those that should be influenced by them. Perceptions may not truly be reality, but they are for those holding them. If the perceptions are accurate but undesired, change the issue creating them. If they are inaccurate, you must change the perception.

To begin changing perceptions, begin with identifying what experiences and stories are generating them. You can't force an epiphany; it takes a change in information and experiences to allow for beliefs to change on their own. While this often begins with changing the information, real progress occurs with changing the experiences and storytelling. As you accomplish this, listen to the storytelling. Who has the loudest voice: the naysayer reminding others of the past, or individuals with newer, better, and more accurate stories to tell?

If you are not actively managing the marketing and experiences of beliefs that should become values within your organization, others will be, and you may not like what they keep reminding others.



Shawn M. Galloway is a consultant, professional speaker and author of several bestselling books on safety strategy, culture, leadership and Behavior-Based Safety. He is a monthly columnist for several magazines and one of the most prolific contributors in the industry, having authored over 500 podcasts, 200 articles and 100 videos.

As President of the global consultancy, ProAct Safety, Shawn's consulting clients include most of the best safety-performing organizations within every major industry. He has received awards for his significant contributions from the American Society of Safety Professionals Council on Practices & Standards, listed in National Safety Council's Top 40 Rising Stars and in the 2018 list of the Top 10 Speakers, EHS Today Magazine's 50 People Who Most Influenced EHS and ISHN Magazine's list of 50 Leaders for Today and Tomorrow.