

From "I Can" to "We Can"

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Create a zero-accident culture

Dan, a safety leader with a major utility company, was preparing to introduce me. I was about to speak to one of his groups regarding the need for everyone to be a leader — a safety coach. Suddenly, I realized that Dan was talking about something very important. No, it wasn't my background as a consultant, coach or speaker. Dan was talking about teamwork, and the belief that alone, no one individual could help the group achieve their goal of zero-accidents and zero-incidents. But together, if they believed in this achievement as a team, a unit, and took the correct steps toward building the right kind of culture, they could achieve it. This was their vision for success!

In psychology, "self-efficacy" is the individual belief that influences a person's ability to reach a certain goal. It's important, but current research suggests that "collective efficacy" — the belief that "we can do it" — is more important than the belief, "I can do it."

Albert Bandura and others have done significant work in this arena and it's relevant to your safety results. Bandura is best known for his work regarding the ways in which people learn by observation, personality development, and the whole "cognitive revolution" in psychology during the 1960s. Research regarding collective efficacy is relevant to improving your safety culture. Here are a few key components that will help you.

1) Start with a plan.

You need to have a plan that will enable you and others to walk the talk about specific safety goals. Everyone needs to believe your safety-related goals are achievable and you have a plan to reach them. This is especially true within today's team-oriented organizations that are working toward a zero-accident and zero-incident culture. Don't leave yourself an out that will allow your organization not to go for zero accidents — it can be done! And if your organization fails — reset the score and start over.

2) Hold people accountable.

Managers and supervisors need to be held accountable to do what's necessary to create the right team spirit and safety culture. You need good proactive safety performance metrics for your leaders. And if you don't have them, make a business case, an ethical case, or a company values-related case — do whatever you must. Performance objectives must hold key people accountable to conduct physical inspections, coaching and feedback sessions, accident investigations, and everyday safety communications that involve good listening.

3) Build on success.

Be sure to discuss and celebrate the kinds of actions that are being mastered and those that are improving. I'm not simply talking about compliance issues like lockout-tagout or PPE use. I'm talking about positive communications, teamwork, and actions by those who go the extra mile to help others through a difficult task with complex safety issues. Create a sense of winning to build momentum for where you want to go.

4) Model the way.

From housekeeping to the most risky operations — people learn by watching, and your actions and the actions of others may be the only procedures someone will ever "read." What your people see makes an indelible impression that can't be easily erased.

5) Use persuasive communications.

Feedback and coaching sessions about specific safety actions and goals need to take place every day. Good safety communications cannot occur only when formal observations are taking place within your behavior-based safety process.

Good safety-related communications from trustworthy peers and supervisors help to connect the heads and hearts of others. This leads to long-lasting changes that eventually move people to work safely even when nobody's around.

As part of your communications, don't forget to share stories regarding close calls or serious incidents. People get emotionally stirred by the past and sometimes it takes an undesirable event to drive leaders to take actions that will vastly improve their safety cultures.

A setup for success

Take some time and think about these five keys and some of today's most successful sports teams. Each has a game plan for success; they hold people accountable for a given job; they build on and celebrate successes; they communicate well and at times, they're emotionally charged — they get pumped-up to meet special challenges! And when they lose, they start over by wiping the slate clean, with a belief that their team is starting over at zero wins and zero losses.

Oh, back to Dan. Did his group believe in their goal of zero-incidents and zero-accidents? Well, not many believed in it several years ago but almost everyone does now.

And guess what? They're moving closer — they've gone from "I can" to "We can" — they believe it, plan for it, and act upon it! Do you and your people believe it?