

Celebrating Safety

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'What gets rewarded gets done.' In many professional communities, this statement is repeated until it becomes a cliché. In seeking to provide this sort of positive reinforcement, many have looked to the desired outcomes they want repeated. Like a parent wanting their child to earn an 'A' on a math exam, they offered rewards for desired incident rates.

Unfortunately, only positively reinforcing outcomes does not account for the fact that there are many ways to achieve the desired outcome. For example, a child can achieve an 'A' on an exam by studying or cheating. In this same way, an organization can achieve a zero-incident rate by working safely, or by not reporting incidents or creating a toxic, bullying workplace culture working safely. Targeting desired behaviors and work practices for positive reinforcement enables continuous, sustainable desired outcomes, where targeting desired outcomes for positive reinforcement leaves the means of achieving the outcomes open for interpretation. Likewise, recognition and incentivizing safety practices only serves their purpose if they manifest continued safe practices. Recognizing and incentivizing lagging indicators without valid and reliable causes is only rewarding good luck or a lack of incident reporting. Defining how safety is expected and why and how safety will be positively reinforced is imperative. Positive reinforcement only works if it reinforces the safe work practices and safety processes that create a safe workplace. Only then can we celebrate safety instead of a fluke incident rate or a month of good luck.

Leading Safety

Before safe work practices and safe work conditions can be positively reinforced, they must first be validated, and, before they can be validated, expectations must first be set. These expectations come from the processes that make up a safety management system: hazard analysis, risk assessment, hazard control, training, communication, leading and lagging indicators, and post-incident analysis/investigation. Furthermore, by integrating these safety management components into the organizational workflow throughout all levels of the teams, the five High Reliability Principles are also covered: preoccupation with failure, deference to expertise, sensitivity to operations, reluctance to simplify, and commitment to resilience (Worden, 2018).

When developing safety systems, validity and reliability are especially important as these attributes enable sustainability. Validity means the safety system is increasing safe work practices and conditions to reduce incidents. Reliability means that if the safety system is continued, it will continue to increase safe work practices and conditions and reduce incidents. In turn, to positively reinforce a safety system, a team must first know that the safety system is valid and reliable so that the correct things are reinforced.

To develop a system that is valid, reliable and able to be reinforced, the National Safety Council recommends a system that encompasses SAMRIC:

- simple
- attainable
- measurable
- repeatable
- immediate
- controlled by you (National Safety Council, 2015)

With these traits, the system is more likely to be understood with each team member being engaged in safety activities that can be taught, overseen and repeated without interference or variables from luck, flukes or other factors such as non-reporting decreasing validity or reliability. For example, if the safety system relies entirely on waiting to see if any incidents occur, and, if so, analyzing the causes, this system relies entirely on luck, flukes or non-reporting. At this point, with hazards analyzed, risks assessed, hazards controlled and safety expectations communicated and validated, safe work practices conditions can be positively reinforced, and, in turn, valid and reliable safety can be celebrated.

Celebrating Safety

I quietly cheered when OSHA published a policy letter in 2012 that dissolved the safety incentive program.

Like Victor Lawe's quote above, many safety leaders had grown disillusioned with organizations promoting safety with invalid, unreliable and counterproductive safety incentive programs either inadvertently or directly causing non-reporting, reprisal among employees or other negative impacts. Many had worked to determine valid and reliable ways to positively reinforce safety when OSHA issued its memorandum in 2012 disallowing safety incentive programs that could lead to those negative elements. Victor continues:

My journey into celebrating safety began by reading Rob Nelson's book, "1001 Ways to Reward Employees" in 2006. Prior to reading this volume, I was adapting my US Army methods to reward exceptional employees through homemade certificates of achievement, gift cards or a free lunch. As I transitioned into safety, I carried the methods from this volume with me.

I have worked in many manufacturing facilities that promised pizza parties to the department that went injury free for 90 days. It was not all as it seemed. A lot of unsavory management practices were involved to get that coveted free pizza. Employees were disciplined or terminated for reporting an injury. Employees were coerced not to report the injury until after the 90-day deadline. It created a cruel society. I refused to participate in those tactics. My goal was to identify the hazard before any one was injured. If an employee under my supervision was injured, I looked at the root causes that preceded the incident.

Positive Reinforcement

To ensure safety incentive and recognition programs positively reinforce the development of safe work practices and conditions, the expected work practices or activities must first be determined. Without clear expectations, a catch-all statement of 'Be careful' does not give employees anything to work towards. If an incident rate decreases without knowing how, it is therefore not valid or reliable. Instead, safety management system components and high-reliability principles can be referenced to determine these expectations.

Safety management systems and high-reliability principles

Within a safety management system, each component contains activities that employees are encouraged to participate in. Each of these can be a basis for recognition or incentives:

Participation – employee participation in safety committees, working groups or other necessary teams show employee engagement and, in high-reliability language, 'deference to expertise.'

Hazard analysis – employee hazard identification also shows employee engagement and, in high-reliability language, 'preoccupation with failure,' 'deference to expertise,' and 'sensitivity to operations.'

Hazard control – employee hazard control recommendations or participation in teams working on items such as standard operating procedures, lock-out-tag-out procedures or other safety needs also shows 'preoccupation with failure,' 'deference to expertise,' 'sensitivity to operations,' and 'reluctance to simplify.' Hazard control also includes direct hazard control actions such as eliminating or removing a hazard or training and knowledge such as completing training or completing a certification.

Communication – employee participation in near-miss reporting, safety stories, safety briefings or other communication shows 'preoccupation with failure,' 'deference to expertise,' 'sensitivity to operations,' 'reluctance to simplify,' and 'commitment to resilience.'

Leading indicators – employee participation in safety observations, safety inspections, near-miss reporting and other leading indicators shows all five of the high-reliability principles. This can include extensions of near-miss reporting such as use of 'stop-work authority,' if necessary, to enunciate a safety need.

Post-incident analyses – employee participation in incident analyses allows for 'deference to expertise' and 'commitment to resilience' along with the other high-reliability principles.

Knowing what will be recognized or incentivized is the first and most important step to celebrating safety. Without these valid and reliable expectations, the details of an incentive or recognition program are irrelevant, especially if the focus becomes finding a means – even if counterproductive or unethical – to get the reward instead of increasing safe work practices and conditions.

Victor continues:

At an automotive assembly company, we used safety bucks as a safety incentive. These canteen bucks were redeemable in our vending machines that were owned by Canteen Services. We used these safety bucks to reward employees for safety practices such as:

- *Identifying potential and existing safety hazards.*
- *Turning in a near-miss report.*
- *Mopping up a spill on the floor.*
- *Completing the most near-miss reports in a month.*
- *Completing the most workplace observations in a month.*
- *Assisting an employee lifting an 80-pound pallet.*
- *Ground guiding a forklift out of tight spot between two production machines.*
- *Knowing the answers to my impromptu safety training quizzes.*
- *Leading a safety stand down at shift change.*
- *Wearing the correct PPE while operating a weed eater maintaining a park area in the City.*
- *Knowing the answers to my impromptu safety training quizzes after training.*
- *Passing a random safety inspection.*
- *Performing monthly safety inspections without being prompted.*

Figure 1 – “Safety Bucks”



I created a policy to explain the safety practices and incentives to create transparency to ensure legitimacy. Programs as such, when implemented with transparent parameters requiring the safety practices needed for a valid and reliable safety culture, encourage worker safety and leadership. One employee was/is a ‘take-charge’ employee who always maintained a safe and clean working environment. If she were caught up on her production, she would often be seen a couple machines away helping others clean up their areas. She identified many hazards through near-miss reports. She was not certified in first aid, but if an injury, she was a runner who located the nearest first responder and brought them to the scene. For motivated

employees as such, recognition and incentive programs can encourage them to improve and sustain their safety skills and leadership.

Ways to Celebrate Safety

Like Victor's 'safety bucks' program, there are many ways to celebrate safety once defined expectations and a transparent program have been developed. For incentive and recognition programs alike, participation and safety can be incentivized and recognized.

Participation

For safety components such as safety committees, participation may mean team members attending meetings. For components such as hazard analysis, participation may mean team members reporting hazards. For leading indicators, it may mean team members performing inspections or observations. These attributes are important to recognize because without participation these activities will be left to the safety professional and, with only one person, much less will be completed with much less input. Additionally, for components such as leading indicators, participation means data development, data that otherwise would not be known and data that could lead to preventative measures.

In the context of a recognition or incentive program, this may mean giving an item or a token for participation benchmarks. As in Victor's example, 'safety bucks' can be given for attending safety committee meetings or completing observations. Or certificates of appreciation can be given for participation. In many cases, even simple public recognition during team meetings is a valuable motivator.

Victor discusses:

How many of you have employees who wear helmets as part of their PPE? Custom labels can be provided to adorn their helmets, celebrating their certifications. Why not?

Figure 2 – Helmet certification labels



By sight alone, we can tell who is certified to operate a forklift, perform CPR, operate a crane, or perform other functions immediately and even quicker if the labels are standardized in placement. This idea originated from my love for NCAA sports and the stickers on football players' helmets showing their achievements. With valid and reliable leading indicators (such as training completions, safe observations and inspections, and others), these achievements can also include days without incidents or other lagging indicators if not based on non-reporting or other negative factors.

Safety

Along with participation, safety itself can be recognized or incentivized. For example, during leading indicator developments, those who are observed working safely can be recognized or incentivized. This may be as simple as again giving 'safety bucks' to a team member observed working safely, or certificates. Or perhaps team members with high scores on their training (as opposed to only completing it) can be incentivized or recognized.

Different Ideas

There are many ways to develop recognition or incentive programs. Along with those already discussed there are infinite examples of items such as magnets, lanyards, pens, mousepads or notepads. Training can be reimagined as a safety fair event with booths covering different hazards or hosting vendors whose equipment is used. Also, home safety topics such as fire safety, school safety and others can be included along with workplace safety training and skills.

Victor discusses more examples below:

Later, at another plastics manufacturer, the organization invested in a packaged program in which employees are rewarded with safety scratch off lottery tickets and a certificate of achievement. The scratch-off ticket could be redeemed for instant prizes or retained until the employee accumulated enough tickets for a higher-level prize. We had one employee who won a master barbeque grill valued at \$1,200 and I had an employee in my department who won a \$125 gift card on the scratch-off I rewarded him with for providing first aid to injured employees on two different occasions.

Awards Programs

Along with positive reinforcement for participation and safety, awards programs can also be implemented. To do so, awards programs can be developed for leading indicator processes such as:

- High-quality safety committees.
- High-quality hazard analyses and risk assessments
- High-quality communications programs
- High-quality training programs
- High-quality leading indicator programs
- External awards programs

Victor discusses:

In other cases, external safety awards and recognition programs may be options. The last plastics company I worked for was a member of the American Plastics Association (APA) who has a safety awards program. The NC Department of Labor (NCDOL) also awarded companies for being safe; it is always good to check on different agencies and organizations for awards programs to apply for. In this area, the National Safety Council has

several different programs, including the Green Cross of Safety Awards and the Rising Stars of Safety each year; they can be found on their site at: <https://www.nsc.org/nsc-membership/awards-recognition>. You will also find certificates, awards, plaques, and trophies available for purchase.

Lagging Indicators


In addition to leading indicators, lagging indicators are often seen as data for awards and recognition programs. The major factor to watch for when lagging indicators are discussed is to ensure they are valid and reliable. For example, if an organization has a decrease in lagging indicators but no hazard analysis, hazard controls, communication, training or leading indicators to explain it, the decrease may be due to luck or non-reporting. However, if the leading indicators account for and validate the lagging indicators, they can be beneficial for recognition programs.

Victor discusses:

In addition, I have created the City Manger's Safety Award program. It started with a policy and was then budgeted and implementation. The previous safety award program was budgeted but was not documented and there was no validity or reliability; nobody knew why departments received the funds they did, and it had zero impact on their injury rate. There was no accountability. Instead, I vetted our current program through numerous stakeholders in the City for feedback and to ensure it was a closed loop system. The City's safety award program currently tracks two Key Performance Indicators: recordable employee injuries and preventable vehicle accidents. While lagging indicators, these are made valid and reliable through safety management components such as leading indicators and preventive action plans. Knowing that the rates are valid and reliable, the awards program provides positive reinforcement. If an injury occurs within a division, I am holding leadership accountable to train their employees on that incident by using a First Alert Template (Figure 3) which discusses the injury without assigning names or blame. The intent is to discuss the preventive measures going forward to reduce recurrence of that particular injury.

Figure 3 – Preventative Action Plan Template

PREVENTATIVE ACTION TEMPLATE



ROCKY MOUNT, NC
THE CENTER OF IT ALL

Division:

Date:

Incident Classification:

Incident Type: If Other please describe:

1. Location of incident: Line 2 from NCIC Form 19

2. Describe fully how injury occurred and what employee was doing when injured: Line 12 from NCIC Form 19

3. List body parts affected: Line 13 from NCIC Form 19

	Preventive Actions Taken:	Completed (Yes / No)	Key Lessons Learned:
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

Please attach training log and email copy to Safety Officer HR-SAFE-201
02/19/2021

Each department is eligible for \$500 per calendar year to use towards anything that promotes safety: training, training materials, software, PPE, equipment, safety t-shirts, or safety trophies. Each winning department head is presented with a trophy and a certificate of achievement signed by the City Manager in front of their peers.

I have found that trophies and certificates have a longer lasting value than meals, cash, gift cards and Safety Bucks. Once the money is spent, the meal has been consumed or the coupon redeemed the employee rarely has anything to show for the event. A copy of the certificate can be placed in the employee's file and the original can be sent home with the employee to show off to the family. The trophy may be displayed at home or in the office for others to admire and see. It is a conversation starter. It is a safety multiplier. The competitive nature spurs others into action and future recognition.

Potential Missteps

When developing recognition and incentive programs, an otherwise positive program can become a negative presence if abused or invalid. For example, incentives are handed out without regard for safety achievements or incentives sought by reprisal for reporting or non-reporting can cause counter-productivity that tarnishes the program.

Victor discusses:

As you can see from my examples that participation in a company sponsored safety incentive can vary. At the automotive assembly plant, participation was 1000% in that

everyone wanted these safety bucks to the point of counterfeiting them. Once accountability and control measures were put into effect through the serialization of the safety bucks and making supervisors sign for them in limited stacks of ten, it had little effect on the participation and recognition.

On the other end of the spectrum at the plastics company where supervisors were misusing these safety bucks or not participating in the process at all, again accountability and control measures were needed to emphasize this was not a “flavor of the month” safety initiative.

Learn from my mistakes. Document what are the rules of engagement should be. Define what it is and what it is not. Continuously improve the process based on your industry’s unique situations.

Conclusion

There are many ways to celebrate safety. With valid and reliable safety developments, each of these can be recognized and incentivized. There are many options for programs, awards and more. If the program positively reinforces proactive safety with continued hazard analyses, hazard controls, communication, training, inspections, observations, near-miss reporting and more, it encourages and promotes safe work practices and safe work conditions. In effect, these recognitions and incentives also help team members’ careers. With all of this, we can truly celebrate safety.

Victor wraps it up:

Look for other ways to celebrate safety in your organization. Please refer to Rob Nelson’s book, “1001 Ways to Reward Employees” you will find that you are only limited by your imagination and your budget. If you are still struggling for ideas network with other safety professionals and find out what they do for incentives. We can always find ways to celebrate safety!

References

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