

BUSINESS LEADERS MUST TAKE A NEW APPROACH TO SAFETY & ACCIDENT PREVENTION

By Guest Writer Brian Fielkow, J.D.

An investment in safety is an investment in your bottom line. Safety is at the cornerstone of an excellent business operation, and leaders who ignore or delegate safety are jeopardizing their organizations' profitability and longevity. Building a safe company is not about more rules and regulations. It is about building a behavior-based culture.

In the past year, we've witnessed major automobile recalls, plane crashes, train derailments and truck crashes. These are on top of the numerous safety failures that are not in the public eye and therefore never make the news.

To create a business environment that is both safe and profitable, we need to change how we think about safety. Government regulation and our 600 page handbooks can only go so far. Personal choice takes us the rest of the way. And the only way companies can influence personal choice is by creating a safety culture within every facet of their business. When it comes to safety, it's less about rules and regulations — it's about managing behavior and realizing that safety is not a cost, it's a strategic choice with profound bottom line results.

June is National Safety Month. While this may not elicit parades and fireworks, let's pause for a moment to embrace the role safety plays in each of our businesses and how safety drives profitability. In doing this, we must abandon antiquated thinking about safety and embrace what **really** drives safe outcomes in our businesses.

Consider the accident involving actor Tracy Morgan, where a truck plowed into Mr. Morgan's vehicle, killing a passenger and severely injuring Mr. Morgan. The truck driver was in compliance with the regulations (i.e., within his legal driving hours). Yet, he had pulled an all-nighter on his own time the night before getting

his truck. There is no regulation that would have prevented this driver from getting into his truck while personally exhausted. Promoting safety is tantamount to promoting individual accountability — **doing the right thing, even when no one is looking**. While some degree of regulation is clearly necessary, real safety excellence is behavior-based.

As leaders, we must demonstrate, teach and manage acceptable safety behaviors. An injury or fatality did not just happen. It was most likely the result of a series of unsafe behaviors that went unremedied.

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Not only must we hold our employees individually accountable for safety results, we must also create companywide (i.e., organizational) accountability. Think back to GM's management of its unprecedented, multi-billion dollar auto recall in 2014. CEO Mary Barra said: “Today, if there is a safety issue, we take action. We've moved from a cost culture to a customer culture.” Ms. Barra highlighted a defect in GM's corporate culture which led to a cost-based decision not to upgrade a switch, leading to needless deaths and ensuing litigation. GM's recall is a reminder that we must be our own harshest critics, not afraid to examine our own processes and procedures continually, with the goal of continuous improvement.

Very recently, we have had to come to terms with the horrific Germanwings crash. Based on the facts available, the

Germanwings crash appears to be a mix of both a deliberate act of a deranged person and a possible defect in the airline's process — a failure in individual and possibly organizational accountability.

While the crash first looked like the act of a mentally ill employee acting in the shadows, the facts have since changed. Lufthansa (Germanwings' parent company) said a search of its records found an email showing that the co-pilot, Andreas Lubitz had informed it of his condition as he was seeking to rejoin its training program after a months-long absence. While we may not know the outcome of the investigation for a long time, we can assume that Lufthansa is reviewing all of its processes and procedures to determine why Mr. Lubitz was readmitted to its training program based on what it knew at the time about the state of his health.

This raises a dilemma for employers. Let's say that we receive information about an employee's physical or mental condition. It would be a dangerous precedent for employers to make medical judgements. After all, most of us are not doctors, and we have employees coming to work every day with a variety of personal issues or conditions, performing their jobs seamlessly. Yet, ignoring a condition which could have adverse safety consequences is not the answer either. In these situations, we are best advised to train our personnel to spot the red flags and then bring in expert help, medical and legal, as needed.

SAFETY BEFORE COST

We must dismiss the old school notion that safety is a cost or somehow hinders production. As business leaders, we have an obligation to create the safest possible environment for our employees and the public. If you think an investment in safety is too expensive, consider the
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opposite. Ignoring safety ultimately will lead to accidents, litigation, increased insurance cost, product failures, damaged reputations and ultimately business failure.

Putting safety on the back burner will hinder your ability to grow. Smart customers now perform due diligence on their vendors. Ignoring safety will cost your business long-term in the modern era. Moreover, ignoring safety will destroy employee morale. Your employees understand that an investment in safety is an investment in their well-being.

Safety is not something that we can delegate. If we, make safety a low priority, the rest of the organization will follow our lead. If safety is confined to a department, it will never take hold throughout the organization. Your safety department can coach, train, and mentor. Only an operationally aligned organization can execute on safety with excellence. Safety execution requires different and vastly broader bandwidth than regulatory compliance. It must be driven by company leadership and then anchored to our front lines.

Let's abandon the notion that business leaders are smarter than our front lines when

it comes to safety. Our front lines know where the real risks lie. They have the answers, if we would just listen. Let's make a commitment to bring our front line leadership into the process and truly listen and learn from our subject matter experts and opinion leaders.

"Safety is not a priority, it is a core value. Knowing the difference between values and priorities is the single greatest point of confusion for an organization." Values define and bind us together, drive decisions in every one of our interactions, and never change. Priorities are tasks requiring action, must be managed daily, and shift frequently based on a given situation. We must ensure that values are never compromised. Safety, and safe behaviors, must be nonnegotiable values in our businesses.

Let us use this year's National Safety Month as a launch point to grow a world-class, behavior-based safety culture in our businesses. We don't need more rules and regulations. We need greater safety leadership, starting from the top of our organization. Safety excellence, after all, is simply a subset of an operationally excellent company. And that starts with each of us.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Brian Fielkow is the President of Jetco Delivery, a multimillion-dollar logistics company specializing in regional trucking, heavy haul and national freight. Jetco was featured as one of the Houston Business Journal's "Fastest Growing Companies" and was voted a "Top Workplace" by the Houston Chronicle.

Brian is the author of "Driving to Perfection: Achieving Business Excellence By Creating A Vibrant Culture", a how-to guide for CEOs based on his 25 years of executive leadership experience in both public and privately held companies. Previously, Brian served as COO of The Peltz Group (the nation's largest privately held recycling company, over \$700 million in operations), was the Executive Vice President of Recycle America Alliance, a subsidiary of Waste Management (the largest environmental solutions provider in N. America), and practiced corporate law after receiving his J.D. from Northwestern University.

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