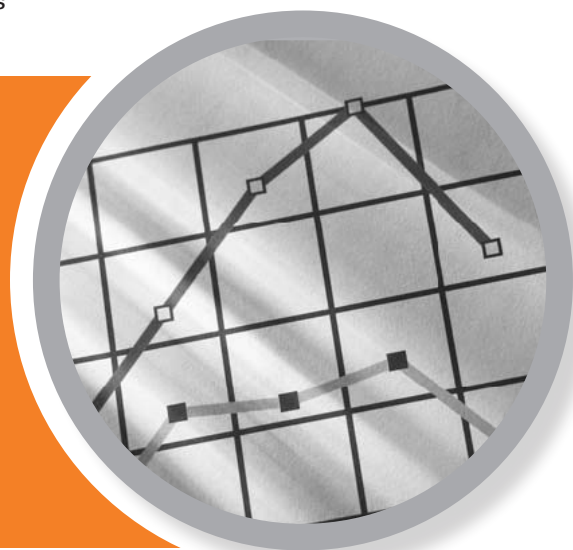


Measuring safety performance

By Ted Ingalls



Research your organization's statistical safety performance measures and bring the data to the session. For example, for the past two or three years: identify the recordable incident rate, number of injuries or illnesses, number of days lost and, if possible, the costs associated with incidents.

Many people subscribe to the philosophy of, "What gets measured, gets done." However, measuring the wrong things or areas that provide little useful information can be misleading.

Pose the following sets of questions to the group to stimulate thinking.

Ask the group which statement they prefer in each of the following sets of two statements.

1. Measures that are likely to predict future performance, or
2. Measures that quantify the number of incidents.

1. Measures that focus on identifying opportunities for improvement, or
2. Measures that quantify the costs of injuries.

1. Measures that show how the organization is aligned with a vision for safety excellence, or
2. Measures that quantify the numbers of days lost due to injury.

Ask which statement the group prefers in each of the sets of two statements below.

1. Measures that are likely to predict future performance, or
2. Measures that quantify the number of incidents.

1. Measures that focus on identifying opportunities for improvement, or
2. Measures that quantify the costs of injuries.

1. Measures that show how the organization is aligned with a vision for safety excellence, or
2. Measures that quantify the numbers of days lost due to injury.

The first statement in each set of questions refers to safety measures that provide information about day-to-day safety activities. The second statement in each set refers to traditional statistical safety measures. Statistical measures are less useful because they are developed long after incidents occur. They are lagging indicators.

Ask the group to name the measures your organization uses to track safety performance. Write the group's responses on a white board or flip chart. Measures that are likely to be named might include: lost-workday-case rate, severity rate, days lost, number of incidents or workers' compensation costs. At this point, share with the group the actual statistical safety performance measures you brought with you to the meeting.

Key point: Make sure the group recognizes that: The statistical safety measures are lagging indicators of performance and are not specific as to causes;

The statistics are valid measures, but other measures of safety performance exist.

The truth about statistics

Safety statistics are assumed to represent an accurate barometer for safety performance.

Ask the group

What do numbers, like incident rates, fail to tell us? See if the group comes up with these answers:

- Statistical safety measures fail to tell us why incidents occur;
- Statistical safety measures fail to tell us what to do to improve safety performance.

In practice, statistics indicate that organizations should undertake preventive actions because people are hurt or made ill. The numbers also can provide trend information.

However, specific data is needed to identify causes and corrective measures.

Key point: In addition to the statistics, it is helpful to measure the level and nature of safety activities that take place in the organization to provide a more complete picture of safety.

To drive the point home, ask the group if present safety activities are continued, and if the organization's incidence rate decreases by 50 percent next year, what the decrease will be attributed to. After the group discusses their thoughts, make the following point: If measures are not in place that specifically identify different or improved actions and activities, then it will not be possible to identify what caused the statistical improvement. Could it have been luck?

Another point to discuss with the group concerns what the safety statistics actually measure. Ask the group if the safety statistics measure prevention activities, or if the numbers measure undesirable events. The correct answer is safety statistics measure undesirable occurrences— injuries, pain and suffering.

Key point: Since safety statistics only measure things you don't want to occur (injuries), it makes sense to measure activities that you want people to engage in, those that promote safe performance. Examples of these types of activities include: number of safety audits, number of safety problems corrected, amount of safety education and number of safe behavior observations.

Summarize the discussion by saying safety statistics are useful for providing a broad view of safety performance – numbers on the "safety scoreboard." However, safety statistics are lagging indicators of safety performance and do not represent the organization's day-to-day safety activities.

An effective approach

Since safety statistics do not measure desirable day-to-day, safety-promoting activities, your organization should use additional measures.

Consider measuring the levels of upstream activity that promote safety each day throughout the organization. These activities educate, promote and facilitate safe operations. An organization that promotes safety performance daily demonstrates that safety is valued.

Ask the group to name day-to-day actions and activities that could foster safe performance in the organization. Write the answers on the white board or flip chart.

References

Web sites

- A Guide to Measuring Safety & Health Performance (Health & Safety Executive, United Kingdom): www.hse.gov.uk/opsunit/perfmeas.pdf

Videos

BWC's Division of Safety & Hygiene video library has a number of videos on measuring safety performance. These are available for loan to Ohio employers. Order a catalog by calling 1-800-OHIOBWC (ask for the video library), or visit our web site, ohiobwc.com.

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