

PRM Website Article:

Rebooting the Safety Conversation in High-Risk Industries

Why metrics and familiar soundbites may simply end up doing more harm than good

- *“We all need to stay focused on goal zero”*
- *“ Our safety performance must always be our first order of business”*
- *“We must work on eliminating “at-risk” behaviors from our operations”*
- *“Our safety numbers need to start going in the right direction”*
- *“We just to work “safe” each and every time we go to work”*
- *“Our commitment to safety must be a value not a priority”*
- *“Things are getting stale, it’s time for a new safety initiative - over to the safety department”*

For those in high-risk industries, these may be familiar soundbites, rallying-calls and conversation openers that often emanate from the C-Suite. Sounds simple enough. And with such a constant reference to maintaining a high standard of safety performance, doesn’t this serve to clearly demonstrate management commitment?

Well unfortunately, in many cases, such edicts may unwittingly end up doing more harm than good. Why? Because the commentary that so often accompanies such statements is simply flawed in its thinking. There is no doubt that leaders within high-risk industries are committed to achieving good “safety” performance. But sadly, many leaders across many different industries are sometimes woefully ill-informed regarding exactly how this should actually look when managing Major Operational Risk. How so? Well let’s take a look...

The use of the word "safety" to describe a tangible end result without clear context and specific accompanying actions is at the core of a wider, more fundamental problem. Ask people what they mean by good "safety" and you'll typically get a response back that talks to "no injuries" or perhaps “not getting hurt”.

Why? because for decades that’s commonly what’s been measured to benchmark performance and convince regulators, customers and other stakeholders that all is well. Metrics in the form of injury rates using such familiar measures as the Total Recordable Injury Rate (TRIR), Near Misses and First Aid cases are often cited as a way to provide a picture of performance to conclude “safe” work. And therein lies a big part of the problem. In essence you are what you measure and if organizations determine “safe” work

by occupational injuries, then why are we surprised that Major Operational Risk remains ever present and catastrophic events continue to happen within high-risk industries.

In other words, if good “safety” equates to such things as “not getting hurt”, then the conversations around performance and expectations will in turn likely be directed toward the management of occupational injuries. And yet throughout high-risk industries, from the board level down, there are still references to major accident events, to remind everyone that such Major Operational Risks could potentially be so catastrophic that it may even call into question the ongoing sustainability of the organization. But amazingly, what’s frequently absent around these references is the day-to-day substantive commentary regarding the importance of measuring the integrity and availability of the *barriers* that are critical to managing Major Operational Risk and such potentially catastrophic events. Barriers can be either hard (e.g. equipment) or soft (e.g. procedures) and can be preventative (to stop a major release or event from happening) or recovery (to stop an unplanned release or event from escalating). Barriers include such things as fire and gas detection, corrosion monitoring, alarms systems emergency response plans etc. And yet the word “safety” is frequently exhorted as a mythical “catch-all” to ensure that all such things are also covered. Unfortunately, in most instances this is simply not the case.

And so, invariably when the "safety" conversation is held - whether this is directed toward further reducing Recordable Injuries, Near Misses or even "At-Risk" behaviors - the focus is almost certainly toward occupational injury prevention and employees “not getting hurt”. But as multiple investigations into major accidents have often concluded time and time again: *“the absence of a personal safety event for a day, a month or even several years provides absolutely no assurance that a catastrophic event won't happen tomorrow”*.

Why?

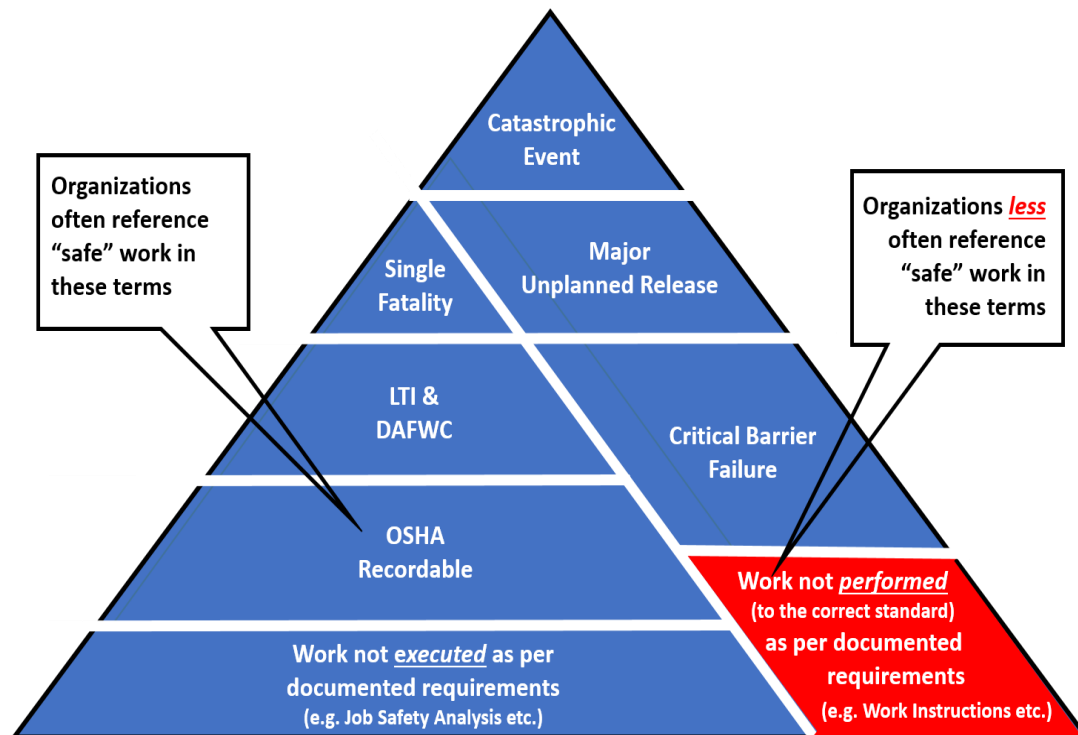
Because the harsh reality is often that occupational injury prevention does not necessarily correlate to reducing Major Operational Risk and mitigating against financial disaster and reputational ruin. In other words, it’s not the finger injuries that make the industry high-risk but the potential for catastrophic events.

So many high-risk industries really need something of a wakeup call when they start talking about “safety”. In essence, leadership in such industries (if they are to be effective in leading and motivating their organizations) must first understand the context and end objective that they seek. In other words, they need to be weaned off their all too familiar historic obsession and comfort zone around high-frequency, low-consequence occupational injuries and start getting informed around the status of their principal *barriers* to better manage Major Operational Risk and avoid potential catastrophe.

Take an example....

Let’s say one of the *barriers* in a high-risk industry might be an effective fire prevention system. So, you would think that when the conversation turns to “safety”, enquiring minds would want to know the status of the fire prevention system and report it at the highest level. Well you’d mostly be dead wrong. On the other hand, what does get measured and reported is whether anyone was injured while conducting work on the fire prevention system - such as performing an annual PM (preventative maintenance) routine. So, in other words, if the PM routine called for working at height and the employee fell and incurred an occupational injury while executing the work, that information would likely be communicated and reviewed at the highest level of the organization.

Metrics Disconnect: "Safe" Work - The importance of Occupational Injuries vs. Major Operating Risk



But what about whether the actual work conducted on the fire prevention system was performed to the correct standard (such that the fire prevention system always functions as intended)? Unfortunately, it's often the case that such information does not get communicated and reviewed at the highest level and in fact, may ultimately go unnoticed and unchecked.

But if the organization should look through a lens of Major Operational Risk - which of these two scenarios should be subject to the most scrutiny? The status of the fire prevention system or the occupational injury incurred? When the conversation and the metrics are skewed toward personal safety then the real "safety" conversation (that manages the Major Operational Risks) all too often ends up getting ultimately lost.

Therefore, to begin changing the "safety" conversation in High-Risk industries try doing the following:

- 1) Stop using "good safety" and / or "no injuries" as tangible end objectives;
- 2) Stop using the Total Recordable Injury Rate (TRIR) and occupational injury prevention as a principal yardstick and key metric for "safe" work in high-risk industries. After all, it's not the finger injuries, the cuts and the grazes that ultimately make such organizations high-risk;
- 3) Make the Major Operating Risks much more transparent and visible across all levels of the organization. Also, when people design, co-ordinate or perform work, make sure they understand the bigger picture if

the work involves maintaining the integrity and availability of the key barriers (preventative controls and recovery measures) designed to manage such Major Operating Risks;

*4) Redesign systems of work to make maintaining barrier availability and integrity a key metric for "safe" work. That means de-emphasizing such things as Job Safety Analysis (JSA's) that focus on **work execution** and occupational injury prevention and begin making Work Instructions (WI's) and Safe Operating Procedures (SOP's) that focus on **performing work to the correct standard** (in this case the function of critical barriers) much more front and center.*

5) Stop measuring work outputs and start looking at "normalized deviance" and the degree of non-compliant behaviors - especially for work that involves maintaining barrier availability and integrity. The reason such non-compliant behaviors should be labelled "at-risk" is partly because there's deviation from intent but importantly, it's also because the work itself is related to maintaining barrier availability and integrity (that support the effective management of Major Operating Risks) rather than simply being yet another focus of occupational injury prevention.