

# The Human Side of Safety



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Our mission is to improve the safety and success of people and the places where they work.

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## When Employees Know What to Do But Don't Do It...<sup>©</sup>

In most industries there is something that every manager knows is critically important to achieving excellent results but also really hard to get employees to do. Because such critical behaviors are tied to success, most companies make sure employees receive training on them. Then, they wait for miracles to happen.

When miraculous improvement doesn't occur, managers find a multitude of ways to remind their employees what needs to be done. They'll even provide a compelling rationale for doing so. Sometimes, they'll tie consequences to performance around the critical behavior. Eventually, many resort to more of the same training only to be disappointed again.

Sound familiar? If so, chances are you're up against an adaptive problem.

*Adaptive problems* are major challenges that are embedded in a social context and require a change in well-established behavioral patterns. They're not technical problems that good training or accountability practices alone will fix.

Heavy-handed and top-down corporate strategies tend to build resistance and resentment when dealing with adaptive problems. They almost always fail; sometimes they backfire, making problems worse. A classic example is trying to reduce hospital infections by mandating that healthcare providers wash their hands every time they enter and exit patient rooms.

Solving adaptive problems requires buy-in from the people most affected by the desired change and eliciting their solutions before initiating training or applying carrots and sticks to performance outcomes.

Sharing the problem with employees and unleashing them to develop solutions can lead to results that exceed management's expectations. A strategic bottom-up process takes time, so it is best reserved for seemingly intractable problems like getting people to adhere to necessary precautions that can be annoying or even seem like an over-the-top requirement.

Seemingly intractable issues often represent adaptive problems that require the development of bottom-up solutions before sustained improvement in performance is likely.