



When a Goal of Zero Prevents Getting to Zero

By Judy Agnew, Ph.D.

In an attempt to improve safety performance, many organizations publically set a “zero injuries” goal. For some, it is a stretch goal, for others it is within reach, and for a few it has been achieved (but often not sustained). From an ethical perspective, companies must strive for zero harm. In actuality, it is always the unspoken goal that all employees go home safely every day. However, is there value in setting a numeric goal of zero and implementing a public campaign around it?

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– Judy Agnew

Some leaders view it as a bold demonstration of the importance of safety. But as with any goal, how you go about communicating the goal, and more importantly, managing toward that end goal matters a great deal. The same goal can in fact lead to the development of very different safety cultures and practices, and very different outcomes.

One thing setting a goal of zero can do is signal that management believes that all incidents are preventable and therefore intends to work relentlessly on prevention. In this case, leading indicators become the focus of management efforts—not the goal of zero. When management emphasizes preventative activities such as eliminating hazards, reporting all near misses, conducting quality pre-task risk assessments, improving the safety of work processes, and investing in improved safety leadership, a proactive and preventa-

tive culture develops. Achieving this kind of culture also requires minimizing negative consequences associated with reporting of incidents—even when the reporting of a recordable incident, by definition, means the goal of zero will not be achieved. Driving fear out of safety requires treating all errors, problems, near misses and incidents as opportunities to learn and using forward-looking accountability to ensure learnings are implemented and lead to improvement. It also requires sophisticated and strategic use of positive reinforcement—reinforcing preventative behaviors, not lack of accidents. This approach to managing safety is the only way to truly achieve the goal of zero.

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Alternatively, setting a goal of zero can communicate that incidents will not be tolerated. This occurs when leaders persist in using lagging indicators to measure and manage safety. If leaders state the goal is zero and indicate that anything other than zero is unacceptable, they may believe they are “being tough on safety,” but unfortunately it sets the stage for many undesirable activities and behaviors. Developing “creative” strategies for determining what counts as a recordable incident and instituting discipline for incidents are just two examples of undesired practices that can develop as people do whatever it takes to meet the goal. The most damaging outcome of communicating that incidents are unacceptable is underreporting. While leaders never want to believe underreporting is occurring, it is an inevitable outcome of managing safety with fear. Unfortunately, this approach (technically known as negative reinforcement and punishment) is the default management strategy when a goal of zero is





set. In other words, if leaders don't specify, measure and manage the preventative activities that will lead to zero, then people will do whatever it takes to get to zero. In the case of safety, the easiest thing to do is not report incidents. The science of behavior predicts this and it has proven true in organization after organization.

Fear-based cultures are not the only possible negative outcome of a goal of zero. Some organizations attempt to get to zero using what they erroneously believe to be positive reinforcement—setting up incentive systems and contests that reward employees for not having incidents. However, if the only measure is the number of incidents, the outcome is often the same. People will not report. While it can be hard to believe that good employees will hide incidents, it is often not for selfish reasons. Underreporting is frequently motivated by a desire to ensure peers don't lose out. No one wants to be the one to report

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an incident that results in the whole group not winning the prize or getting the incentive. The temptation to not report, so as not to "ruin it for everyone," is very strong. The bottom line: such incentives drive the wrong behavior.

While setting a goal of zero is always done with the best of intentions, if positive and proactive management of preventative activities is not used, it too often leads to undesirable

activities that **ultimately prevent getting to zero.**

The only way to achieve zero is to know what is really going on in the workplace so that hazards and error-likely situations can

be identified and improved. That requires reporting all incidents and near misses, which in turn requires positively reinforcing reporting, by letting people know reporting is helpful. Ironically, getting to zero requires positively reinforcing the very thing that ensures you won't achieve your goal (at least for a period of time). It is a paradox but make no

mistake, there is no other way. If the behavior of reporting is met with anything other than positive reinforcement, you will create fear of reporting. When there is fear of reporting, fear of failing, or fear of acknowledging that things are not perfectly safe, the goal of zero is out of reach and in some cases, the goal can be a recipe for disaster, as important pre-cursors of potential catastrophes are hidden.

Given all this complexity, the goal of zero incidents is controversial. Some debate

whether zero is even possible while others think setting a goal of zero is essential. Many see the undesired effects described above and think it is a bad idea. One thing is certain, just stating a goal of zero is not helpful. Goals alone don't improve anything. How safety is managed is what ultimately matters. When organizations manage with leading indicators—when they manage what people do to prevent incidents—they are on the path to zero.

[About the Author]

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As senior vice president of safety solutions, Judy spends her time helping clients create sustainable safety cultures. She also helps clients with strategy execution beyond safety, and general management and leadership improvement across cultural and generational differences. In her free time, Judy can be found on a pool deck, soccer pitch or volleyball court cheering for her two kids.

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