

SAILS—A SAFETY DIAGNOSIS TOOL

Safety Assessment by Interviewing & Listening to Stakeholders

By Jean Ndana

Is it possible to reverse a decades-long trend of poor safety performance in only 2 years in a unionized manufacturing plant? Yes, if you first uncover the operating root causes, craft an appropriate safety vision (desired future), then develop and implement the right strategy to achieve the new safety vision.

When the author joined his former employer's safety and health department, he found that the plant was besieged with serious safety issues. Several years of ineffective safety management had fostered a culture of mistrust and disrespect that was deeply rooted in the plant's DNA. While safety was a focus of workers' vitriol, the poor culture affected more than safety. Hourly workers voiced persistent criticism of nearly every aspect of the plant. No matter what they did, plant management could not shake the perception that they were indifferent to employees' safety and welfare. In addition, several citations stemming from employee complaints led to OSHA visits and citations. These persistent problems were detrimental to productivity, quality and employee morale.

The author developed and implemented a series of safety initiatives to turn things around in the first 2 years at the plant. These initiatives were then incorporated into all phases of manufacturing, and management saw positive effects on efficiency, quality, housekeeping and morale, as well as the bottom line.

The overall performance incrementally improved. In fact, 2 years after implementation of the new safety strategy, the company's safety performance jumped from the fourth quartile for its industry to the first quartile. The facility's OSHA incidence rate dropped dramatically to 3.2, half of the industry average at the time. The company reduced its injury rate by 75% in 2 years, and workers' compensation costs dropped from \$1.5 million to \$300,000, an 80% reduction. The previously strained relationship with OSHA became a cooperative one with more openness, respect and trust. Management and employees had a better understanding of each other's viewpoints, and workers began showing initiative instead of silently following orders, growing more comfortable engaging their minds before their hands.

What are some of the transferable lessons here? This relates to a critical

question challenging many in the safety field: How can an OSH practitioner help make such a dramatic turnaround in a unionized manufacturing plant whose safety performance nearly landed it on OSHA's severe violators list? A pragmatic three-step model—diagnosis, vision and path—was developed and used to reverse the negative trends at this facility. This article discusses the first step in the plant's transformational safety journey—diagnosing the root causes of the situation—and a tool used in this process: the safety assessment by interviewing and listening to stakeholders (SAILS) tool.

This tool helped excavate not only the underlying causes of the plant's poor safety culture but also the contributing factors, and even inspired solutions for these issues. The care that was taken and the seriousness that was adopted were paramount, because when conducting a root-cause analysis in a challenging situation that has no clear-cut single cause, you likely will not get the diagnosis right if you do not use the appropriate tool. And if you do not get the diagnosis right, you likely will implement the wrong solution. The SAILS tool was instrumental in the positive transformation of the plant and its resulting and sustainable success.

Diagnosing the Root Causes

As a reminder, root-cause analysis is a method of uncovering the underlying causes of a given situation or problem to then identify appropriate solutions. Stated differently, a root-cause analysis involves tracing a situation or problem back to its origin to find the appropriate solutions.

When trying to improve performance, be it at the organizational or personal level, it is critical to determine and understand the current state, and identify the underlying root causes of these challenges to map the road to the desired future.

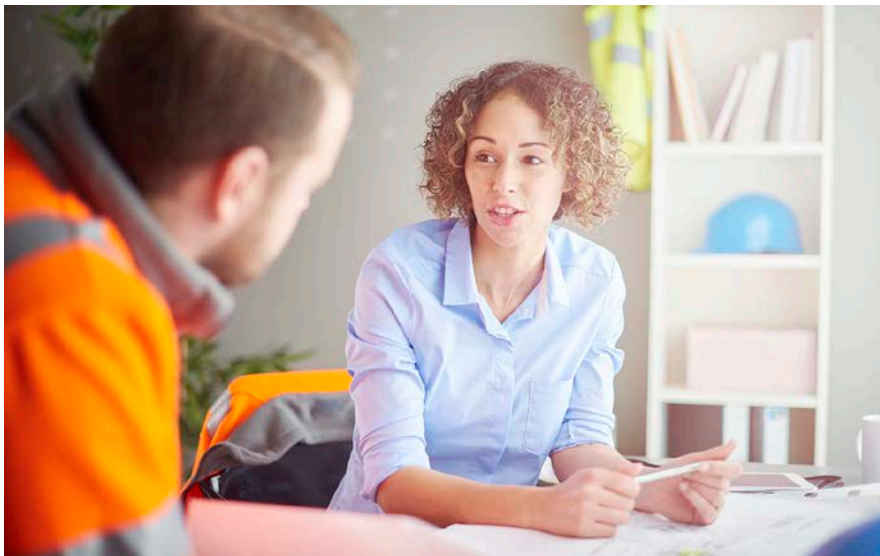
The plant's history was put under a microscope and minutely studied to identify the underlying causes of the plant's situation. In the author's experience, it can be limiting to only

review documents or utilize an off-the-shelf safety survey. These tools are limited when you want to know what is happening at the grassroots level and also want to transform the workplace in a relatively short period. The OSH practitioner must take a comprehensive and holistic approach to make the most accurate diagnosis possible and develop solutions that not only strike at the root of the problems but are also accepted by the workers and supported by management. Several factors or components—including the physical environment, equipment, production, floor layout, and all the facets of the safety program (people, practices, behaviors, beliefs, planning, performance)—must be closely examined with a critical, unbiased eye. An OSH practitioner's knowledge of every detail of the workplace ecosystem as a whole will give them many more options for success.

The successful diagnosis at the plant consisted of several mutually complementary tools, such as field immersion, observations, documentation reviews, interviews with labor and management, and focus group discussions. These tools were mutually complementary and essential. In this case, the employee interviews proved to be the most decisive. To be fruitful and impactful, the interviews conducted were different from conventional safety interviews. This tweaked style of safety interviews tool was the SAILS tool.

What Is SAILS?

The SAILS safety diagnosis tool offers practical ways to excavate the root causes of safety and health issues that an organization is experiencing from the perspective of employees and stakeholders (vendors and contractors) with the intention to find solutions to all these challenges. This is achieved through interviews with not only employees but also stakeholders, tapping into their wealth of knowledge and experience. The SAILS tool also allows OSH professionals to learn from other organizations' best



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practices and uncover hobbies and skills frontline employees may explore outside of their day-to-day job that can be leveraged to implement and continuously improve the organization's safety initiatives and activities.

If successfully executed, SAILS provides fodder to chart a course of action toward a workplace culture that is embraced by workers, supported by management and ultimately produces desired results.

The SAILS tool includes five phases, each with its own purpose (or purposes):

1. Opening: The goal of the opening phase is to build rapport by connecting with every interviewee, and gain their emotional and intellectual buy-in.

2. Previous employer: This phase is used to assess employees' professional backgrounds, previous job functions and responsibilities, and to learn from their previous employers' best safety practices.

3. Hobbies and volunteer work: This is used to discover workers' hobbies that can be harnessed and leveraged through safety activities or initiatives.

4. Current employer: The goal of this phase is to assess how comfortable the employee feels working at the plant, understand the employees' perspectives on the plant's difficulties, and gather improvement ideas and suggestions.

5. Closing: The goal of the closing phase is to thank the interviewee and give them the opportunity to ask questions.

SAILS in Action

The formal interview process started with production floor employees, with a goal of at least five employees per shift each day, one at a time. These interviews used a similar script, with the goal of explaining who the interviewer is and the purpose of the interview in a relatable manner. During the opening phase the interviewer should try to be approachable, relatable and nonthreatening by putting workers at ease, creating a smooth conversational flow, and making them feel important, valued and needed.

Nearly every worker expressed excitement and enthusiasm to share honest answers, thoughts, ideas, and suggestions because they felt comfortable to speak with someone who was new and therefore had no knowledge of the plant personalities, politics or history.

The dialogue began with a series of questions relative to the worker's professional background, previous job functions and responsibilities. Some questions include: "Before coming here, where were you working?" "What were you doing there?" "What trainings did you go through?" "Was safety taken seriously at your last job?" If employees answered "yes" to the last question, the follow-up question was: "What is one safety-related function your former employer performed in an excellent way?" If the worker answered "no," the follow-up

question was: "What were they supposed to be doing that failed or what were they not doing?"

The interviews effectively engaged workers and resulted in the reporting of a significant number of conditions and practices detrimental to safety performance, such as workers not speaking up when asked to perform a task or job they had not been trained for or management not providing feedback when an unsafe condition or hazard had been reported.

Next, employees were asked about their hobbies and any volunteer work they might be doing.

The next series of questions was about the plant, with the goal of assessing how comfortable employees felt working at the plant, understanding their perspective on the plant's difficulties and, if possible, gathering ideas and suggestions for how some issues could be fixed. Workers were asked their opinions on the plant, such as what they like or dislike, if tools are provided, and coworkers they go to for advice when they have problems or concerns.

During the closing phase of the interview and before thanking the person for their responses and suggestions, the interviewer asked if the employee would like to say anything else.

After interviewing employees, the next stage involved interviewing management (frontline supervisors and managers). The interview protocol format was similar. Management staff were asked various questions to gauge their understanding of the nature and circumstances of the plant's troubled situation as perceived by hourly workers, and to identify remedial actions that could improve the situation. Questions included (in no particular order): "What do you like the most here?" "What do you like the least?" "If you had a piece of advice for me, what would it be?" "If you were the plant manager, what one action would you take that you know or believe would have positive effects on the safety and health of the plant?"

Unlike other approaches, the safety interviews did not stop with employees; some vendors and regular contractors who had knowledge of the plant and some of its employees were also interviewed.

The author gleaned a wealth of relevant information after almost 2 weeks of conversations with hourly employees, management and regular vendors. The insights gained supported crafting a detailed, comprehensive action plan that was submitted to the plant manager a week

later. This step was the first action necessary to begin turning things around.

Success of SAILS

The SAILS tool worked well because, like conventional safety interviews, SAILS taps into the wealth of knowledge and experience of employees. But the particular strength of SAILS resides in the way it is structured, the sequence of the questions, the types of questions, and its ability to tap into employees' hobbies and past professional experience as well as the knowledge of regular vendors and contractors.

1. Structure

A Formal Opening Phase

The first step is a built-in formal opening phase with the goal of building rapport by connecting with each worker and gaining their emotional and intellectual buy-in. This phase is key because it sets the tone for the rest of the conversation. In the author's experience, most interviews do not have a formal opening phase. To accomplish that, the interviewer does a couple of different things. First, the interviewer briefly shares personal details, such as where they come from, how and where they grew up, what got them into their current role, what they like about it, what they like to eat, and what hobbies they enjoy outside work. Through this personal storytelling, the interviewer creates a bond that helps build strong, lasting workplace relationships and alliances.

Second, the interviewer expresses their passion and enthusiasm for safety. When you do this, you become a magnet to others who will be attracted to your high level of energy and want to help and work with you. Philosopher Rollo May put it in a more colorful way: "There's an energy field between all humans. And when we reach out in passion, it is met with an answering passion and changes the relationship forever."

Third, the interviewer must make interviewees feel important, valued, heard and needed—all key feelings that every human craves. Mary Kay Ash (2008), founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, posited:

Every person is special! I sincerely believe this. Each of us wants to feel good about ourselves, but to me, it is just as important to make others feel the same way. Whenever I meet someone, I try to imagine him or her wearing an invisible sign that says: make me feel important! I respond to this

sign immediately, and it works wonders. (p. 31)

Fourth, by showing some vulnerability and helping employees recognize that nobody can achieve these goals alone, the request for help comes across as genuine. Vulnerability is a driving force of connection. When we open up about some of our weaknesses, we are more likely to connect with people. We impress them with our strengths and connect with them through our weaknesses.

It is only after identifying the underlying causes that you can suggest a course of action. If the root cause is missed, the wrong solution will likely be prescribed.

Previous Employer Phase

Many employees shared best practices from their previous employers (e.g., involving hiring manager or supervisor in the new hire safety orientation, conducting targeted weekly one point lesson) that were implemented. These actions helped expedite the plant's transformation.

Hobbies & Volunteer Work

The goal of the hobbies and volunteer work phase is twofold: to discover workers' hobbies and, later on, to harness and leverage this information through safety activities. Employees will not be randomly assigned or invited to safety activities. Instead, they will be invited to those activities that ignite their passion. The idea here is not to stimulate passion, but to discover what makes employees passionate, then complement it.

For example, one employee liked fishing and had developed a successful YouTube channel to share his passion with others. That employee's skills in creating and editing videos was harnessed and leveraged when the employee helped the plant develop before and after videos as well as safety training videos. Another employee enjoyed drawing, a hobby he had since childhood. This employee helped design safety logos and posters for all safety activities and campaigns at the plant. Another employee who volunteered as a firefighter at the local fire

department was able to borrow a smoke machine for use during the plant's evacuation drills. One of his colleagues from the fire department also attended the plant's annual drills as an observer and provided useful feedback that helped improve future drills. Finally, one employee enjoyed tinkering with cars. He used to buy old wrecks and pieces of equipment to fix them up and sell them. That employee was helpful in designing and fixing machine guards.

2. Sequence of Questions

The sequence of the questions is not random in the SAILS approach. The questions related to hobbies and volunteer work are asked before the questions regarding the current situation and challenges facing the plant. The author chose this sequence of questions to put employees at ease so that they were relaxed. When people talk about their passions, they are happy, they loosen up and their guard usually comes down. This puts them in a good mood and makes them more receptive to answering questions about current challenges in an honest and candid manner.

3. Types of Questions

Questions such as, "If you are asked to say one safety-related thing your former employer did very well, what would it be?" have a specific purpose. By asking this, the author was trying to learn some best safety practices that are utilized at other organizations.

Questions such as, "If you have to go to just one or two coworkers for advice on any problem or concern you're having, who would you choose?" also have a specific purpose. By asking this question, the author tried to identify the employees who are the most influential, respected and connected to others. These are the employees who Everett Rodgers, in his theory on the diffusion of innovations, called "early adopters," or those that Malcolm Gladwell (2000) called "connectors." These are individuals who know many people and also have an instinctive gift for making social connections (i.e., employees to whom other employees naturally gravitate). Early adopters or connectors are powerful influencers and therefore play a critical role in any change effort. Indeed, once identified, these people were critical of the plans to transform the culture. Most of them were "enlisted," or won over, but a few of them were not. The author then made sure their negative

influence was contained by, among other things, increasing communication frequency, diversifying channels of communication and broadcasting any single improvement no matter how small.

Lastly, questions such as, “Are you doing any volunteer work for nonprofit or charitable organizations?” are valuable because they enabled the author to find how they (or the management team) could assist those workers in some of the external activities that they are already passionate about. Imagine how engaged an employee would be if their safety manager gave them some money and, more importantly, worked side by side with them for their favorite charitable or nonprofit organization?

4. People Who Were Interviewed

The SAILS tool, unlike conventional safety interviews, does not stop with employees. It goes above and beyond the normal process by leveraging vendors and regular contractors who not only have good knowledge about sections of the plant’s operations, but also have been to other organizations and have seen things that may be useful to us. For example, every July, the plant shut down for 2 to 3 weeks to perform preventive maintenance, repairs, and maintenance tasks on machinery or the building itself (e.g., floor, roofing, renovations). Some regular contractors who the author interviewed provided valuable information and insights, allowing the author to improve the way these shutdown tasks were conducted. Even the janitorial crew provided useful insights. This information related to the definition of the scope of work, roles and responsibilities of all participants, the preparation work that had to be done internally before contractors could arrive on site, the timing of purchase order receipt, and other areas. These discussions with contractors led to the implementation of several changes, including an after-action review after each shutdown to capture and document all the lessons learned; and an annual contractor safety meeting to ensure that they were aware of and informed about key plant safety updates.

Conclusion

Socrates is credited with saying, “Treatment without diagnosis is malpractice.” When tasked with solving a specific problem or when put in a challenging situation that has no clear-cut single cause, it is critical to start with the

diagnosis of root causes. It is only after identifying the underlying causes that you can suggest a course of action. If the root cause is missed, the wrong solution likely will be prescribed. What you see at the surface level is rarely the problem; it is what cannot be seen beneath the surface that matters.

SAILS is a simple but powerful tool that offers OSH professionals practical ways to not only unearth the root causes of safety challenges in an organization, but to also identify frontline employees’ hobbies and skills beyond their day-to-day job that can be successfully leveraged to implement and continuously improve the plant’s safety initiatives and activities. SAILS can do more. In addition to helping OSH practitioners create connections with frontline workers at a personal level, this five-phase diagnosis tool can be used to capture other companies’ safety-related best practices. Finally, SAILS helps find appropriate solutions that not only strike at the root of the problems but also are embraced by workers, supported by management and ultimately produce desired results. **PSJ**

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