

Safety Indicators

How does your company measure safety success? A low or decreasing incident rate, fewer injuries or illnesses from one year to the next year, fewer citations, etc.?

According to some safety professionals, using post-event measurements such as injuries, workers' compensation costs, previous year's MSHA data, etc. may be using only half of the equation. These "lagging" indicators represent the past, highlighting incidents that cannot be changed. To look at what is happening now to ensure such incidents do not happen in the future, "leading" indicators need to be considered.

Lagging indicators are after-the-fact measurements that gauge past performance, such as incidence rates and injury and incident costs. Think of it as looking in the review mirror. Leading indicators attempt to measure performance by using tools such as job safety analyses and job observations to give you an idea of what may lie ahead. Think of it as looking ahead as you drive.

Leading indicators are measurements of what is happening today. This includes evaluating conditions and behaviors and, most importantly, having the opportunity to coach and encourage changes in these before there's a negative outcome.

An excellent method for gathering leading indicator data is to conduct regular work area audits or inspections that look at all aspects of the operation including manpower, equipment, materials, methods, housekeeping, etc. A sound job safety audits should examine everything from worker training to whether equipment is being used correctly or is in good shape. The more observations that are completed, the more comprehensive the picture of the operation becomes...what is being done right and what is being done wrong.

Job hazard analyses can pinpoint where potential recordable accidents could be identified before they happen so corrections can be made to avoid them. Using on-the-job observations, root causes of problems can be identified before they result in an incident. If bad equipment or poor training is identified, those risk factors can be presented to upper management for correction. Front line employees, supervisors and management can work together or accompany safety department team members on jobsite observations so they see firsthand what may need fixing and can "open their eyes" to safety concerns in an area.

To be most successful, companies should look at both lagging and leading indicators. Leading indicators can help flush out problems before they become issues, and lagging indicators can help gauge how well the leading indicators are being used. If your leading indicators suggest an overall good safety culture with fewer risks, but your lagging indicators tell a story of rising injuries, the targeting for leading indicators may be off. It is important to remember that companies need to have the right leading indicators and support all that comes along with leading indicators such as risk assessments, positive reinforcement and safety culture development.

What indicators are you looking at?

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