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Faced with a problem, humans spontaneously attempt to find solutions. This is how safety initiatives are born: an operator extends the scope of procedures, an ad-hoc procedure is created in response to an unanticipated or degraded situation, etc. This is how managed safety emerges.

## Unsafe compliance or non-compliant safety ?

Depending on the safety culture that is in place at a given site, managers do not necessarily look kindly upon initiatives, as they raise questions about the balance between regulated and managed safety. Should a more prescriptive approach be taken in order to have greater control over safety performance? Or should we rely more on the professionalism of teams?

Finding a way out of this dichotomy requires seeing initiatives as complementary to what is prescribed, rather than deviations. Initiatives can be divided into two major types.

**A. Co-regulated initiatives** are officially defined by the entity, and the conditions in which they must be triggered are known. For example:

*reporting hazardous situations, requests for modifications to equipment that improve safety, participation in events that promote safety, shared vigilance, sharing of good practice.*

**B. Self-regulated initiatives** are safety behaviours that rest principally on professionalism and are not necessarily shared or authorised. These initiatives can become problematic for managers.

## What do self-regulated initiatives look like ?

1. Initiatives that adapt operations to current conditions. For example: *the cable of a power tool is exposed to the weather. A quick-thinking operator will make sure that it doesn't run through a puddle.*

2. Initiatives that fill in the gaps in procedures. For example: *the forced landing of an American Airlines DC-10 at Sioux City in 1989. Following the explosion of its tail-mounted engine, much of the plane's hydraulic equipment was damaged. The crew found themselves faced with an unanticipated complex situation and recruited a pilot from among the passengers.*

3. Initiatives that improve the level of safety of an existing procedure. For example: *an electrician who installs a shunt in an electrical cabinet. In order not to forget that it is there, he uses a very long shunt cable that prevents the cabinet door being closed when it is in place.*

4. Initiatives that compensate for the unexpected effects of a procedure. For example: *train drivers who are asked to stop and wait between two stations. The regulations require that procedures are followed. However, experience shows that if the wait goes on for too long, passengers will become impatient and try to get off the train. To overcome this problem, rather than follow procedures, drivers will move the train forward very slowly, and then address the situation in their own way.*

## When it works and when it does not work

These initiatives very often benefit safety: they are common-sense actions carried out by someone who knows the business. But this is not always the case. Initiatives can fail when:

- The need for an initiative is not



detected and the situation is left to degrade (*e.g. an operator does not see that one of the boards in the scaffolding has come loose*).

- The initiative creates a new problem. For example, an out-of-control situation is mistakenly understood as normal, or knowledge about the situation is incomplete.
- The need for an initiative is acknowledged, but the action is not carried out. Here, the fear of sanction can encourage conformity to the detriment of safety.

### **Making initiatives safe**

Initiatives are human actions: they cannot be made reliable by decree. However, the causes of their failure can be identified and compensated for. Here are some ideas:

- Maintain healthy working conditions (*e.g. the time available, the condition of tools and instruments, collaboration*) that make all human actions safer.
- Ensure that there is a very good understanding of the activity so that individuals can anticipate the consequences of their actions and those of their colleagues. This requires

a training programme that includes both practical and theoretical aspects of the job.

- Seek the advice of peers, be ready to ask questions and cultivate doubt.

### **I am a manager. What do I have to do ?**

1. A framework must be defined, and its development represents an opportunity to cooperate with all stakeholders. The framework must include, notably, the definition of co-regulated initiatives and situations in which self-regulated initiatives are encouraged. This cooperation is an opportunity for experienced operators to express their views on shortcomings or gaps in existing procedures, and to integrate initiatives arising from their personal experience into official documentation.

2. Once the framework is in place, the positive contribution of teams to safety must be recognized by managers. This formalizes actual working practices and demystifies the need for certain departures from prescribed practice. Moreover, initiatives are evidence that managers have confidence in their teams, which means that fear of

sanctions is no longer a criterion in their decision making. Finally, the recognition of initiatives delegates power to teams in the field, which is a source of occupational well-being.

3. Few initiatives degrade safety. However, if this does happen, it is highly visible as the safety management system seeks primarily to avoid unwanted events. Formalising initiatives helps to highlight the positive contribution of daily work to safety.

4. Initiatives that do lead to an unwanted event must not lead to a total ban. The conditions in which events unfolded must be analysed and fed into the learning from experience process.

### **Take-home points**

In the course of the normal working day, humans spend their time compensating for small, unwanted or undocumented variations. They also help to strengthen rules by providing reports from the field. Therefore, paying explicit attention to initiatives reflects wise management, as it places the emphasis on the actual work that is done, and puts humans (rather than rules) at the centre of safety production.