

Human & Organizational Performance – A path to improvement for all organizations



Introduction

As a result of traditional safety improvement initiatives, many companies have achieved significant reductions in the total number and frequency of injuries and illnesses in their organizations. However, despite their best efforts, this significant downward trend in total injuries and illnesses did not extend to their most serious injuries and illnesses.

The fatal and serious injuries and illnesses (FSIIs) remained stable or realized only slight reductions over the same period that the total numbers experienced significant declines. This trend led to the search for novel approaches to safety and health, and for many companies, led to the beginning of their Human & Organizational Performance (HOP) journey.

Interestingly, HOP is not a safety and health discipline. HOP is an operating philosophy combining human factors engineering with organizational psychology and leads to better, more efficient, more resilient and safer workplaces where employees and leaders are both engaged and valued by each other and the organization.

The goal of this paper is to introduce you to HOP, ignite a desire in you to learn more and motivate you to begin your own personal and organizational HOP journeys.

What is Human & Organizational Performance (HOP)?

Many people have suggested “HOP” is just a fancy way of referring to a program designed to manage, and ideally eliminate, human error. It is true one of the core principles of HOP is the recognition that error is part of the human condition; however, HOP is not a program for managing human error. HOP is an operating philosophy providing a new way of looking at work, people and the systems in which people get work done.

HOP is an operating philosophy that recognizes error is part of the human condition and an organization's processes and systems greatly influence employees' decisions, choices, and actions, and consequently, their likelihood of successful work performance, i.e., work completed on schedule, within budget, safely and achieving desired quality.

Why HOP?

HOP allows organizations to better access the power of its people, and in turn, realize more effective, sustainable, and resilient systems and processes. As mentioned earlier, many organizations begin their HOP journeys to address fatal and serious injuries and illnesses (FSIIs) because HOP is a critical component of FSII prevention. However, the benefits of HOP are not limited to safety and health. Because HOP focuses on enhancing organizational processes and systems with an understanding that humans are fallible, organizations are better able to recognize, understand and address risk.

As a result, organizations that deploy HOP see significant improvements in employee engagement, work quality and system reliability, as well as safety and health performance, and achieve levels of overall operational excellence that have never before been achieved. The broader the integration of HOP (H&S, Environment, Engineering, Quality, Finance, etc.) the broader and greater the benefits will be.

Who Should Implement HOP?

No matter how mature or green your organization's safety and health programs are, no matter the size of your organization, your industry or where you are located, it is the right time to begin your HOP journey. There are no qualifying criteria that must be met before you may begin your HOP journey.



Because HOP is an operating philosophy, it will meet you and your organization wherever you are today. Every organization will derive benefit from deploying HOP today.

Six Key HOP Principles

The following six principles provide the foundation for understanding and deploying HOP.

1. Everyone makes mistakes. Error is part of the human condition. *Everyone* makes mistakes – even the best, brightest and hardest working employees make mistakes. Error is not a choice; employees do not “choose” to make mistakes. It is also important to recognize not all errors and mistakes result in negative consequences. However, when they do, we must still treat them as errors and mistakes and not as violations, which implies a conscious choice was made and is often met with punishment or discipline.

2. Employees are masters at adaptive problem solving.

In an ideal world, work instructions would completely and accurately represent the work employees are asked to perform. However, not only is this not always true, it is **NEVER** true. Work instructions are never 100% complete and accurate. Furthermore, how managers and leaders plan and envision work, never fully matches how work is actually done. (Yes, I said NEVER!)

This is true not because the workers needlessly or inappropriately vary from work instructions, plans or expectations, but because the only way to get work done successfully and meet the expectations of the organization and leaders is to ADAPT to the work given to them each day.

If workers stopped every time they were faced with a situation that differed from the work plan or work instructions, very little work would ever get done. Workers are paid to get the work done, and they do an amazing job of problem solving and finding ways to adapt – adjust, tweak, modify, alter, revise, amend and/or fine-tune – in order to get the work they are faced with each day done successfully! This truth is not good or bad, positive or negative, rather, it is just a reality.

3. Context drives the actions, behaviors and decisions of employees.

In this statement, context refers to organizational processes, expectations, values, incentives, goals, tools, resources, job-site conditions, training, mindset and culture. It is a compilation of the total work environment as experienced by employees at the time and place they perform work.

Context is constantly changing, sometimes subtly, and other times rapidly and significantly. People’s actions, behaviors and decisions are not only influenced, but driven by the context in which they are operating. There is a concept called “local rationality,” which says people do things that make sense to them at the time, under the existing circumstances, context and with the information available to them, otherwise, they would not do them!

4. Leadership response to failure matters.

When something “bad” happens in your organization, such as an injury, a quality defect impacting thousands of dollars of inventory or an environmental release, how do your leaders respond? Your leaders’ response to events today will influence if, how and what events, near misses and even improvement ideas are shared with the organization in the future. A punitive response by leaders will not only limit the communications about the current event, but is likely to stymie future communications and notifications of events and failures.

A leader’s response includes the words, actions and even the body language exhibited when responding to and talking about a failure. Employees may even begin reporting only those events that would have been discovered through other means, such as a fork truck accident that dents the truck or an event witnessed by other employees. In this “Crime and Punishment” response culture, the organization tries to find someone to blame, and quickly jumps to discipline.

In a “Diagnose and Treat” response culture, leaders will not rush to judgement and will take the time to learn about the event, listen to the work teams and inquire about the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities for improvement existing in the organization’s systems. In this culture, every failure is viewed as an opportunity for the organization to learn and improve, and any failure that didn’t result in significant consequences is actually viewed as a gift.

5. Blame fixes nothing. Blame is the enemy of improvement. Blame silences communications, cuts off access to information, impedes learning and stifles improvement efforts. The following quote was coined by Todd Conklin, one of the thought leaders in HOP, “You can either blame and punish, or you can learn and improve, but you CANNOT do both!” Most organizations will intellectually agree with this statement, but often struggle with it in practice, especially when the failure is significant. It takes a very strong leader to resist the need to hold someone accountable after a bad event and stay focused on learning.

6. Improvement happens through learning. It is only after learning true improvement can be achieved. If an organization jumps to action without first learning, they can only be confident the action is a change, but not an improvement. In fact, action without learning can sometimes make things worse rather than better. Organizations with a learning culture ensure learning opportunities are built into the rhythm of work and happen at all levels of the organization. They learn from events, as well as from normal and unusually successful work. Listening is viewed as a skill that can get better with practice and is recognized as a vital part of the learning process.

Starting Your HOP Journey

HOP deployment refers to the process of integrating HOP concepts, principles and tools into an organization’s systems and operating rhythms. There is no one best HOP deployment path. Both the timing and the emphases will vary for each organization. Each organization’s HOP journey will and should be unique to their needs, resources, structure and systems. Here are two suggestions for beginning your HOP journey.

Event Response – Nearly all experts agree integrating HOP concepts into an organization’s event reporting and response processes should be done very early in their HOP deployment efforts.

- Adjust your thinking about events from “why” the event happened, to “how” the event happened. The “why” mindset naturally leads to a person that messed up, and easily descends to discussions on blame. Asking “how” directs your thinking to weaknesses and opportunities in systems and the work environment, which leads to learning and improvement.
- Train everyone in your organization who might receive reports of events, failures or mistakes from employees on the six HOP principles shared and coach them in proper response techniques and actions.
- Ensure your event response process includes time to learn about an event before any response actions are taken or conclusions are drawn. Remove any arbitrary deadlines and timetables for responding to an event or any other expectations that may rush judgement or response actions.
- Eliminate any processes that automatically enact discipline for not following procedures, even if the procedure relates to high-risk or high-consequence work. Taking the time to learn about an event should ALWAYS happen before any decisions are made or actions are taken.
- Replace the crime and punishment language traditionally used following an event with language that better represents to goal of learning and improving. Suggestions include:
 - Replace investigation with event analysis or event learning
 - Replace witness with interviewee
 - Replace evidence with facts, data and information

Blue Line Reviews – The “Blue Line” refers to the path workers take to get their work done. As explained in the second HOP Principle, this path is necessarily adaptive and does not match the work path that was planned and envisioned by leaders. Blue Line Reviews are field observations of work by leaders with the goal of better understanding how work is actually performed.

It is important that Blue Line Reviews be seen and conducted as opportunities to learn, connect and inquire, and all criticism and judgement be withheld. Asking inquisitive, open-ended questions is an essential part of Blue Line Reviews. *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*, by Edgar H. Schein is a great book to help you become skilled at listening for learning. A few questions you may use include:

- Did anything in your work surprise you today?
- Tell me about the last time you had to adapt or veer from the job instructions?
- What is the worst thing that could happen in your job? What can be done to ensure this never happens?
- What is the best and worst part(s) of your job or this task?
- If you had a \$1MM, what would you change about your job?
- Is there anything I can do to improve your job?

Recommended Reading

If you would like to learn more, please consider reading one or more of the books listed below. There are many great books on HOP and HOP-related topics. This is a short list meant to get you started on your HOP journey. Each of the books listed below uses real world examples, provides practical approaches and is written in a fairly easy reading format.

- *Pre-Accident Investigations: An Introduction to Organizational Safety*, by Todd Conklin
- *The 5 Principles of Human Performance: A Contemporary Update of the Building Blocks of Human Performance for the New View of Safety*, by Todd Conklin
- *Humble Inquiry: The Gentle Art of Asking Instead of Telling*, by Edgar H. Schein
- *Bob's Guide to Operational Learning: How to Think Like a Human and Organizational Performance (HOP) Coach*, by Bob Edwards and Andrea Baker
- *Risk-based Thinking: Managing the Uncertainty of Human Error in Operations*, by Tony Muschara
- *Disastrous Decisions: The Human and Organisational Causes of the Gulf of Mexico Blowout*, by Andrew Hopkins

