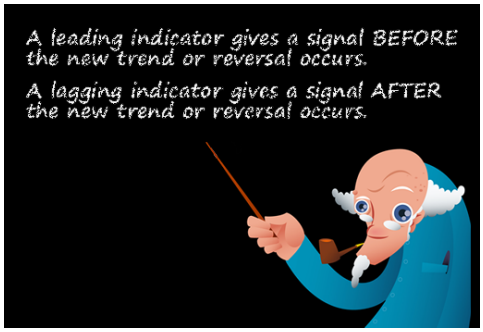
How to Put Leading Indicators into Practice

Excerpts from NIOSH Science Blog, 2/17/16, Joy Inouye, Campbell Institute of the National Safety Council[1]

The use of leading indicators is a hot topic in occupational and environmental health and safety. The Campbell Institute has been studying leading indicators to help organizations take advantage of their predictive power. The Institute defines leading indicators as proactive, preventive, and predictive measures to identify and eliminate risks and hazards in the workplace that can cause incidents and injuries. Consider an indicator as a concept that a company would like to measure, such as "employee engagement." In contrast, a metric is a way of actually measuring this concept, such as "number of employees leading safety meetings."



While the Institute's research described leading indicators, explained their importance and provided specific examples of indicators, many organizations were unsure about how to start using them. This became the focus of a white paper[1]. Four common themes and takeaways arose:

Leverage what is already being measured. Don't reinvent the wheel. Take an inventory of all your existing indicators to see what might work well. Schneider Electric started looking at safety training hours because this was already being measured. Don't be afraid of the "bottom up" approach. The tracking of training hours as a leading indicator was first adopted at individual Schneider Electric sites before being rolled up to corporate.

Just get started. It may seem overwhelming to start a leading indicators program, but even Institute members admit they began with very small programs. Don't try to find the "perfect" leading indicator: a universal one doesn't exist. You won't know the true value of an indicator until you give it a chance. Knowing that most leading indicators will have to be adjusted in the future makes it more practical to just begin. Cummins, Inc. started small by tracking health and safety assessments and corrective/preventive actions. The reason for choosing these two indicators was that these data were available at the site level and worksites would not be burdened by gathering additional information.

Track meaningful and actionable information. Leading indicators should provide a clear path forward on how to improve safety. Schneider Electric realized that merely tracking training hours wasn't as predictive as it had been at the beginning. They shifted to tracking the effectiveness of training by periodically quizzing employees in the months following the training. They found retention of training information was more indicative of injuries and near misses.

Secure Leadership Support. Leadership support for leading indicators is crucial. Participants noted that getting buy-in from different parts of the organization (management, human resources, frontline workers, engineers, etc.) required speaking "different languages" to appeal to their unique needs. Differences among the research participants were few, but raised interesting points for future discussion. Any successful safety management system should have a balance of predictive leading indicators as well as more outcome-based lagging indicators, such as fatality and injury rates.

Register for a free webinar on this new research on March 10, 2016 at 10:00 am CST.

Go to: http://eventcallregistration.com/reg/index.jsp?cid=58972t11

[1] http://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2016/02/17/leading-indicators/

[2] *Elevating EHS Leading Indicators: From Defining to Designing.* http://www.thecampbellinstitute.org/file/download.php?id=2015092336b107f72d10a379134af9249d3457ab

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