

# Serious About Safety

## Gap analysis helps companies assess safety in practice

By Diane M. Calabrese

**Q**uality and safety are as inseparable as two sides of a coin. A safe workplace first saves lives but also garners favorable attention from insurers, contracting partners, clients, and regulators. Yet even the safest workplace can benefit from assessing what it can do better, because precisely aligned safety expectations and practices lower the risk of an incident.

Alignment means corporate management, senior management, field supervisors, and field employees share the same understanding of safety goals and how to meet them. A periodic checkup helps fine-tune your program.

Many tools exist for evaluating alignment. Many of them use some version of gap analysis, a system that puts quantitative handles on

qualitative appraisals. In short, a gap analysis looks at whether everyone involved in a situation sees it the same way. The bigger the differences in the way groups of employees describe the same environment, the more a company has to do to bring cohesion and focus to its safety program.

### Minding the gap

A company can do its own analysis to identify gaps in what employees in different roles are thinking (and doing). But many companies choose an outside firm that specializes in assessment to administer a standardized tool.

“It’s always beneficial to get unfiltered information from employees,” says Bonnie Lunzer, Safety Director at Parsons Electric LLC. That task is often easier when a consultant gathers the information.

Lunzer’s predecessor, Bill Olson, now in executive management at Parsons, selected the gap analysis tool Parsons used. Most of the results were compiled by the time Lunzer took over in July 2006. “As the new safety director, I find the analysis useful,” she says. “It has helped us take the pulse of where the safety culture is and what we have to focus on.”



## Tools of choice

Commercial gap analysis tools typically rely on a series of statements and questions, which are put to employees in all ranks. The tool that Parsons used is the Cultural Gap Analysis® (CGA), specifically designed for building contractors, from CM-Services, Baltimore, Maryland.

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With aggressive implementation of the Cultural Gap Analysis recommendations, contractors have reported MOD rate decreases of more than 30%, OSHA incident rate decreases of 40%, and lost workday incident rate decreases of 55%. For more information, visit [www.cm-services.com](http://www.cm-services.com).

The CGA tool from CM-Services is built on a series of yes or no questions. The streamlined design reduces the time it takes for employees to respond. Even so, the questions are carefully formulated to extract the same information that would derive from a question with multiple response options.

Not only does the CGA provide information about the safety culture at a company, but it also compares results to benchmarks for the industry, so a company can know how it ranks among its peers.

## Gap analysis

Written gap analysis tools are constructed so that a respondent reads each statement or question and considers his or her level of agreement. With a statement, the choices might range from “not at all” to “very strongly” or other language. With a question, the responses might range from “never” to “always.”

Psychology buffs will recognize the Likert Scale in action. Each qualitative (or prose) response has a number — usually one through five — attached to it. Those numbers become important in making comparisons. For instance,

a statement might read: “Are you held accountable for your safety performance?” If everyone agrees strongly or very strongly, there is good correlation, or alignment. If not, there is something to work on.

That’s a highly simplified and hypothetical example. The assessments depend on statements and questions customized for the client. The CGA questionnaire Parsons used had 36.

Responses are analyzed in a variety of ways. Field worker responses can be compared to those of corporate management. Responses to subgroups of questions can be compared simultaneously between any two or more groups of employees and so on. Virtually any permutation of comparison is possible.

## Results

The results from a gap analysis point to places where there is more work to be done because, simply put, not everyone is on the same page. “We’ve already been implementing some

respected company. Still, it was nice to see the tool highlight them, Lunzer says.

## Fine-tuning

A gap analysis tool allows a company to know where efforts at fine-tuning safety should be made. Parsons learned something about the importance of communicating the rationale behind the goals.

For example, it is a necessary and nonnegotiable step to give employees a protocol for personal protective equipment. Yet the step is best taken if it is coupled with information that explains to employees how their safety matters — to emphasize the human and financial benefits of safety and pre-planning.

Similarly, safety awards celebrate good outcomes and commend those who played lead roles in those outcomes. They can never substitute, however, for day-to-day communication with employees that reinforces the appropriate things employees are doing.

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~ Bonnie Lunzer, Safety Director, Parsons Electric

changes, but the CGA supported and focused our efforts,” says Lunzer.

Some particularly gratifying results emerged immediately from the gap analysis Parsons did, Lunzer says. “Questions that correlate to overall pride in the company put alignment at 96 percent,” she says. For questions correlated with overall management, it was 94 percent.

Those results were not surprising, of course, because Parsons is a well-managed and highly

The idea is to make certain that employees’ perceptions mirror their actions and vice versa. In all matters of safety, the action taken should be seen as a valuable one.

As a subcontractor, Parsons is eager to demonstrate its commitment and competence in safety, Lunzer says. “Undertaking a formal gap analysis is an excellent opportunity for our company to better understand the perception of management’s commitment to safety and how we execute it.”