

## ***Puncturing the myth of World Class Safety***

*“World Class” phrasing belongs to tennis tournaments, luxury cruises and resorts.*

Safety and health professionals are trapped in the same “world class” fad you see today in almost every field, from cooking to sports. Professionals’ goal is to implement safety and health programs that deliver “world class” performance. But many pros are left wondering why their programs are not delivering what management expects.

To gain insights into how “world class” safety and health might be defined and why programs may not be delivering, a graduate class of mid-career safety and health professionals was asked to provide their opinions and perspectives for this article. Their responses have been edited into seven ways of looking at “world class” in the context of safety and health. And the insights shatter some of the illusions that have surrounded the phrase, and sent some pros off tilting at windmills.

### **1) A swimsuit competition?**

“World class” safety and health is similar to the term “love,” according to Scott P. Smith. Neither can be quantitatively identified or measured. Both put a shiny gloss on what might otherwise be a dull and lifeless entity.

Striving for “world class” status can be futile and detrimental to a successful organization. Pros can be trapped trying to identify and deliver a program somehow defined by the “world” as being superior.

Another analogy: The Miss Universe Pageant only has participants from one planet, which seems to taint the entire concept. Anyway, in the end, it’s always the swimsuit competition that decides the winner. So is an organization’s injury rate the “swimsuit” competition of a “world class” safety and health program? The winning program is the one with the lowest number, right?

A “successful” safety and health program is not driven solely by attempts to decrease its injury rate, Smith suggests. Instead, you should increase the safety

and health IQ of the organization's members, establish a well-defined communication pathway, encourage self-awareness rather than production at the cost of self-abuse, and integrate the equal contributions of all levels of employment into the expansion process.

"I've never told my boss I manage a 'world class' safety and health program," says Smith. "But I can tell him our injury rate is a fraction of our industry's injury rate; with no lost work days in 1.5 million hours. Plus, every program is supported with a written detailed procedure accompanied by 16 hours of training for every employee who steps foot on my plant site."

## 2) "Best-in-Class" is better

"World Class Safety and Health" can be described in terms of: 1) committing to a best-in-class vision (the "why"); 2) aiming for best-in-class performance (the "what"); and 3) implementing best-in-class systems (the "how"), summarizes David A. Jones.

**Vision** — "World class" organizations define and communicate safety and health as a core business value, rather than a priority subject to changing conditions. This value applies everywhere, to everyone, in every activity and decision, at all times.

**Performance** — "World class" organizations set out to eliminate, or at least minimize, workplace injuries and illnesses, then establish a strategy to instill a prevention-oriented culture ("how we do things around here"). Making safety and health an essential measure of business success requires a sustainable commitment by management leadership at all levels ("walking the talk"), allocating sufficient resources, and reinforcing safe behavior while not tolerating at-risk behavior. It is accepted as fact that a safe operation is a productive, reliable and profitable operation.

**Systems** — "World class" organizations strive to define and use best practices to manage safety and health through formal systems integrated into every aspect of the business. Effective planning, proactive risk control, performance monitoring,

and corrective actions based on lessons learned are constantly promoted. Such processes typically include: employee participation, hazard identification and risk assessment, competence, safe operations, integrity of facilities, contractor management, product stewardship, management of change, incident investigation, emergency management and compliance assurance.

### **3) Where are the metrics?**

There really are no benchmarks to objectively determine “World Class Safety and Health” to the satisfaction of the masses, says Stuart McCullough. Everyone talks about culture and other aspects of an excellent safety and health program, but where are the metrics, he asks. What you are left with is the rarely, if ever, obtained, difficult-to-measure “World Class Safety Award” — a fictional award given only to those arrogant enough to use it.

“Industry-leading class” may be a better moniker, says Barry Nichols. After all, how can you compare facilities in different parts of the world in order to be “world class”? Who’s to say the safety culture in one country is better than another?

It’s like advertising the world’s best coffee — how does one judge this accordingly?

Nichols gets frustrated when one industry reports no injuries for a “million or billion hours.” Different industries cannot compete on the same playing field because of inherent tasks and hazards.

An industry-leading safety and health program would show value to the bottom line, would be integrated with process changes from the beginning and would be proactive, where feasible, describes Nichols. This type of model industry program would still need to acknowledge mistakes and wrong decisions so other companies could improve their progress toward industry-leading safety and health.

#### 4) “World class” disenchantment

Several safety and health professionals express outright disenchantment with claims of “World Class Safety and Health.” It seems more like an EHS marketing cliché than anything else, says Jesse N. Pacem. “World class” stature has been bestowed on companies based simply on incident rates, while numerous gaps exist in the EHS system, such as employee ownership, line leadership, EHS “make work” bureaucracy, according to Pacem. “There seem to be far too many opportunities for false claims to ‘world class’,” he says.

Too often organizations only look at their incident rates when making the claim to be “world class,” asserts Dustin Richartz.

Along these lines, Voluntary Protection Program “Star” status is a great accomplishment, says Richartz, but it doesn’t necessary mean you have achieved “world class” status. It merely means you have experienced a low enough incident rate and you have met VPP qualifications.

“To be truly ‘world class,’ all members of the organization must believe safety is a value not only at work, but also outside of the workplace,” says Richartz. “Safety metrics can help identify good performers; but due to the amount of fraud and misreporting, metrics should not be utilized as the only measure for being ‘world class’.”

#### 5) “World class” NOT!

It’s easier to define what “world class” safety and health is not versus what it is, for Richard L. Barch. It is not:

- Disengaged management
- Little or no safety training
- Disengaged employees
- High injury rates
- No reporting of near misses
- Lots of repeat injuries

“Even though we’re not all cooks, we know bad soup, or good soup, when we taste it,” says Barch. “Bad soup tastes awful; it’s too salty, etc. But to describe good soup is a little harder to articulate.”

It’s the same way with “World Class Safety and Health.” You know it when you see it, but to describe it is sometimes difficult.

Why?

Well, it depends on who is doing the judging or comparing or assessing. If you look at ISO or VPP or ANSI and compare your program to those standards, you could probably tell where your gaps are in order to close them. But after you close the gaps, you still don’t necessarily have “World Class Safety.”

Why?

None of those standards address the most elusive of factors — the most important determinant of so-called “World Class Safety and Health” — culture. It is culture that determines if a group can internalize safety and health by doing the right thing when no one is looking. A solid, dynamic and responsive safety and health culture transcends any written program, training gap, program gap, unexpected event, etc.

Bottom line: Before you have “World Class Safety and Health,” you must have a “World Class Safety and Health Culture.”

## **6) Too elitist**

“World class” phrasing belongs to tennis tournaments, luxury cruises and resorts, says Philip A. Bumala. He believes ultimate safety rests with individual responsibility and accountability. This creates an error-tolerant, open dialogue set of circumstances in which everything needed for compliance is readily available. Non-compliance then becomes a matter of willful action or negligence. Potential willful action should be stopped at the human resources department through interviews and screening, or later via termination. Negligence might be a failure in training relative to the conveyance of knowledge, understanding, skills and

proficiency. Individual responsibility and accountability should be a standard of care, second to none, asserts Bumala. But to title it “world class” is silly.

Most people or organizations are not willing to make the sacrifices required to attain true “world class” status, says Michelle Gray. Think of elite athletes. Many of us would like to stand up on the gold medal podium during the Olympics — but few of us have the natural talent or the desire to dedicate our whole existence to obtaining the goal of being the best at that one sport, she explains.

## **7) An “idealized state”**

“I’m starting to believe ‘World Class Safety and Health’ is an idealized state — something a company can work toward, always closing the gap by half,” suggests Linda Weitzel. Low injury rates alone are not enough to be considered “world class,” which is too often the case, she says. A model safety and health organization must be robust enough to weather some variation of injury rates.

For Tami Froelich, “World Class Safety and Health” is conducting business in a way that all employees from the CEO to the receptionists know and believe safety is of very high importance to the company. There is no need to bribe, threaten or constantly remind employees of their role in safety; they know it and believe in it. Individuals feel a right and a duty to correct hazards in the workplace. No one takes an “it’s not my responsibility” attitude. Specific procedures are in place and followed when an unforeseen or changed condition occurs. Management never places profits, schedules or “appearances” above the safety and health of their employees. Sadly, not many of these companies really exist, Froelich concludes.

## **When “World Class” works**

- A “World Class Safety and Health” program is one that works — a system or program that accomplishes the safety and health mission of the EHS department and the organization.

- It incorporates operational and administrative efforts into the safety process so workers are always thinking of safety, even when production may suffer if they do the safe thing.
- A “world class” system is influenced by management, not just the EHS department management, but from top-down leadership within the operation that ensures safety is not an afterthought. — *Ashley C. Williams*
- “World Class Safety and Health” occurs when safety and health are an integral part of every component in an organization.
- The commitment starts from the most senior levels of management in the organization and filters down to each level below.
- Accidents and incidents are considered unacceptable.
- Every effort is undertaken to ensure an environment exists where safety is in place first — before processes, work procedures, equipment and people go to work. — *Geeta Sharma*
- A democratic organizational system as a whole (from bottom to top) must agree to name the safety program “world class,” and then everyone participates in defining it.
- If everyone understands the term indicates an unattainable but desirable goal for the future through adaptation of the organization as a whole, this title may be appropriate.
- Beware that the “world class” mantle could still be misinterpreted by clients or others outside the organization. — *Jennifer Kapp*

### **When “World Class” stifles**

In one particular case witnessed by Jennifer Kapp, a corporate safety director held regular meetings with branch facility safety management to solicit input to enhance the safety program. But since the program was already “world class,” negative feedback was not tolerated, even if the feedback was accompanied with solutions. So very little feedback was given. Once a safety program is defined as

“world class” it creates the perception that all is perfect and improvements are not necessary.

Kapp also contends the title “world class” is dangerous and egotistical. It’s similar to calling yourself (or one who works for you) an “expert” or “guru” in a particular area of a consulting service. All it becomes really is a marketing gimmick.

Dwayne Sibille agrees that “world class” says you are already there and throws continuous improvement out the window — at least in management’s mind. Workers and safety specialists/technicians know better and typically suffer as a result. Sibille saw this happen at a site where once it became VPP certified, the belief was “we have won the Super Bowl of safety management.” But this attitude ignores the fact that the only competitor is injuries and sometimes it is plain old dumb luck that keeps you safe. Eventually luck runs its course and the site risks losing VPP certification and/or a reality check kicks in.

### **One journey toward “World Class”**

Bombardier has launched a North American initiative called “World Class Manufacturing” (WCM) that has rocketed its EHS performance forward, according to Lola Miller. She is not just talking about reactive measures (i.e., injury rates), but the safety culture has evolved with increased near-miss reporting, employees coaching other employees on safe behaviors and a true ownership and responsibility and pride for all aspects within each work area.

All of this has occurred with little effort on Miller’s part — the system and employees are the driving force. Miller explains each of the steps in the journey has criteria that must be met and maintained in order to progress to the next step. The “Qualified” and “Performing” steps focus on workplace and organizational aspects, while the “Excellence” and “World Class” steps involve improving workplace culture.

Annually, each North American site must achieve established levels of performance. Initially, the driving force was upper management’s commitment and support, but as sites progressed into the final steps, employees took pride in achieving their goals in the previous steps and assumed responsibility for accomplishing the final steps.

## Closing thoughts

Everything today is “world class.” If you are not “world class” you must be something far less classy with which most do not want to associate. Even though the term “world class” has been overused, it’s rendered totally meaningless and useless without any relevant safety and health metrics or benchmarks to define the term. Vapid phrases like “world class” inspire nothing at best and at worse inspire internal contempt.

It’s interesting to note none of these mid-career safety and health professionals belabored the notion that compliance was the determining factor for having a “World Class Safety and Health” program. Refreshingly, everyone agreed valuing all aspects of employees’ safety and health, at work and at home, will produce greater business results and worker safety performance in the long run.

As safety and health professionals, we need to step off this meaningless and useless “world class” treadmill. We need to focus our attention on creating innovative approaches that induce our fellow workers to persuade themselves that safety and health needs to be an integral component of their everyday life, both on and off the job.

**James E. Leemann, Ph.D.**

Dr. Leemann assists companies to improve environmental, health and safety performance through the application of systemic organizational and behavioral competency development to deliver business value in rapidly changing environments. Dr. Leemann is the president of The Leemann Group LLC and an adjunct professor at Tulane University’s Center for Applied Environmental Public Health. He's also the project director of the *Pulse of the Professions Research Project* being conducted by Tulane, the Wharton School and the Center for Environmental Innovation. For more information, please visit [www.leemanngroup.com](http://www.leemanngroup.com) or call 480-513-0298.