If you want to start a ruckus, tell someone who believes their organization is world class in safety that they are probably wrong. As one senior safety manager said, those would be fighting words in our organization.

Despite years of pontificating on this topic, no one can definitely answer what is required to be labeled world class in safety. No doubt there are a lot of opinions, but at this point, what it takes to be world class is mere speculation.

If you are a runner, and you want to compete in the 1500M event in the Olympic Games, you know that as a male you have to run about 3:35 to qualify. A female would have to run about 3:53. Yet just hitting that time isn't enough. You have to prove you can run that time in high pressure events. Hitting the time doesn't make you eligible, hitting the time in the right situation and consistently makes you eligible. When you meet all the requirements you are classified an Olympian.

With world class safety, the measures that must be achieved are yet to be defined. So how can anyone state they are world class when there is a no agreed upon benchmark?

The biggest mistake people make is they point to injury rates to classify their organization as world class. The injury rate they point to is typically a country specific measure. There is no doubt that trying to use injury rates as proof of world class is the most flawed measure an organization can use to self-declare a world class ranking. Outstanding injury rates are an outcome of world class safety; injury rates by themselves are not the measure of world class safety.

The primary issue preventing anyone from proclaiming world class safety is that there is a lack of data on the following:

- How the employee is experiencing the workplace. Especially as it relates to how their experience is influencing their ability to control exposure.
- The efforts and, most importantly, the metrics that show the organization is undertaking actions to align the employee's experience with the desired cultural state.

Regarding how the employee is experiencing the workplace this is multi-faceted. Some of the factors that influence their experience include the level of production pressure, level of workplace stress, the team environment, safety climate, equipment reliability, physical conditions to mention a few. Some of these influences change daily. Because of this variation, to be world class an organization would require having measurement tools sensitive enough to measure these influences on a daily basis as importantly they would need to have the capability to record how they responded to the variation in near real time.

Having this information will be the hallmark of a world class safety organization. Yet today we don't have the capability or technology to measure these items in real time. Advancements are happening every day that move us closer — and we will get there.
Organizations that have this capability, we predict, will focus little attention on their injuries rates and instead be focused much more on what makes them a high reliability organization. Like the Olympian, it isn’t about hitting the required time once, it is long-term, consistent performance in varied situations.

So, if it is true that no benchmark exists, it is a good thing for organizations to label themselves as such? We say definitely no.

Risks to declaring your organization “world class”

There are some inherent dangers to declaring an organization “world class.”

First, overconfidence is a real danger. Believing we have won the race is risky when the race is actually never over. It allows people to be tempted to take their foot off the gas even though they aren’t at the finish line.

Second, we also know it is very easy to get to a low Total Recordable Incident Rate (TRIR) and declare ourselves a winner without doing the work. This creates a false and potentially demotivating situation especially if something occurs that proves we are not as good as we thought or announced.

There’s also a false notion that getting recognition as “world class” means excellence. Organizations are highly motivated by accolades, which is a natural reason to pursue them. But wanting the title of “world class” for the sake of the title or the accolades is a dangerous game to play. It also indicates lazy leadership. Checking the box for the recognition is not the same as doing the deep work of developing the framework, structure, systems, leadership and culture necessary for true safety excellence. If you want your organization to enjoy validation, it won’t come from external awards. It only comes from the hard work necessary to be great.

Ironically, overconfidence in leadership can ultimately lead to the loss of confidence from the workforce. The danger of pursuing external awards for the sake of proving your organization is “world class” is that the workforce really knows whether the commitment is there. Because supervisors and other managers know there isn’t a robust enough effort or a clear roadmap in place to validate those claims. Declaring your organization as “world class” when the artifacts and visible commitment are not there will only destroy the credibility of the leadership.

How safety excellence really happens

Leaders who truly exhibit world class excellence are those who are not interested in the accolades for the sake of accolades. These are leaders who commit to getting in front of injuries before they happen.

This requires understanding both the role of exposure in safety and the sources of that exposure. It also requires a passion for mitigating or eliminating that exposure.

A truly world class organization, is constantly looking for new and important changes that need to be factored into their system. One new area of emphasis is how the brain impacts safety and how workers can be trained to recognize routines that create blind spots to exposure. Closely behind is the influence of technology on the worker experience. If you proclaim yourself world class it would be hard to convince leadership you need to do more. However that is an attribute of world class: never standing pat.

World class is not determined by metrics, it is determined by the consistent effort of leadership in pursuing safety excellence in their culture.

They do this by:

Creating a passion for people. Leaders must see it as their personal responsibility to keep people safe every day. For companies that truly excel in safety, the passion for safety must come from a deeper place, from the hearts, as well as the minds, of their leaders. We refer to it as a personal safety ethic. When safety derives from a personal safety ethic, the leader is committed to the safety of people because “the right thing to do” is embedded deeply within their personal values system.

Focusing on exposure control. A focus on exposures is a radical departure from a focus on hazards or unsafe actions. It requires probing deeply into the factors causing vulnerability to address them before incidents and injuries occur. In organizations focused on exposure, people understand that potential matters. They pay disproportionate attention to those exposures with the greatest potential for life-altering injuries and fatalities. Organizations that excel in safety never lose sight of their dedication to eliminating all injuries, but they are proportional in their allocation of resources and in their response.

Focusing on leadership systems alignment and governance. This means having enough trained workers and equipment, as well as supportive safety and performance management systems, to ensure tasks are done safely and on schedule. Organizations that want to consider themselves world class emphasize safety in employee selection, compensation, training and development, and organizational structure. They encourage actions and motivate behaviors that build and sustain a culture of safety excellence.

Embracing change. Organizations that consider themselves world class recognize that science, technology and generational change are inevitable and positive. Change is viewed as a chance to further control and reduce exposure. It’s a given that improvement must be never-ending, and that where there are breakthroughs or better ways, they must be welcomed and mastered.
Conclusion

Is it a good thing for organizations to label themselves “world class?”

No. If a pandemic like Covid-19 hits and you have dozens of cases in your workforce, the injury rate you once relied on as a benchmark no longer works as a measure of performance.

But, to prepare for an emergency like a pandemic, earthquake, or any kind of natural disaster means your organization will be more resilient should disaster strike. The key is maintaining that forward looking consistency of safety over time through a commitment of resources, effort, and passion. Working on safety in a way that convinces the organization that their wellbeing and ability to succeed without negative events is a relentless focus. Only then can leadership create change that is sustainable in an organization.

World class is not about a number. It’s not about a preconceived benchmark. World class is about making sure safety is the lifeblood of an organization. Only then can it be validated by workers, and the industry, that the organization is in a class of its own.