



## Does Zero-Tolerance Really Work?

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Many organizations concerned with reducing serious injuries and fatalities adopt a set of core safety rules (sometimes called life-saving rules, golden rules, or cardinal rules) for which they communicate there will be zero-tolerance of violation. They declare that a severe consequence (e.g., termination) will result from any violation. The intentions here are good – the organization believes that these are rules where there can be no variation because of the potentially life-altering and fatal results that could easily occur. But we often see a zero-tolerance policy creating a tangle of complications that can actually undermine safety. This happens when a zero-tolerance policy is adopted without careful planning and consideration of seven key issues:

1. What does “zero-tolerance” really mean? It often means “immediate termination – no questions asked” but may mean something less than this such as time off work. Everyone in the organization must clearly understand what zero-tolerance means, how this differs from the discipline process used for other rules, and why a different approach is being used for a select set of rules. A clear definition is needed – one that is established by leadership in a consultative manner, and effectively communicated to everyone in the organization.
2. Are you ready to accept that the target of the zero-tolerance policy will eventually be “the best worker you ever had?” It’s always useful to apply the “Best Worker Test”: When your best worker, (sometimes even a supervisor or manager) who always goes above and beyond expectations and is acting with the best of intentions (e.g., to keep customers happy, to maintain production, etc.) violates a zero-tolerance rule, are you ready to apply the policy even if it means immediate termination? A rigid zero-tolerance policy often looks like a good approach until it has to be applied consistently, and if leaders then start making exceptions the credibility of both the program and the leader are badly damaged.
3. Will you apply the same zero-tolerance philosophy to leaders who condone or accept violation of the rules? If a worker has been doing a task inconsistently with a zero-tolerance rule for some time and that has been observed and not corrected by a supervisor or manager, it is not only the worker performing the task who should be subject to the zero-tolerance consequence. To do otherwise causes serious damage to the safety culture.
4. Is zero-tolerance applied to the right rules? In some organizations too many rules are classified as zero-tolerance, creating a culture of fear and leading to cover-ups, tension, and poor communication. In other organizations, rules that are more administrative in nature and not directly focused on mitigating the most serious exposures are included on the life-saving rules list and subject to zero-tolerance. (For example, one organization identified prompt reporting of all injuries as a zero-tolerance rule. Another organization applied zero-tolerance to a worker who used the wrong color lock in a lockout/tagout situation even though complete de-energization had been achieved). This broad use compromises the perception that the zero-tolerance rules are really life critical, and can convey that the objective is to create ways to discipline people

rather than being to protect people from injury. It also damages management credibility because employees see leaders focused on inconsequential and trivial details, rather than on issues that really save lives.

5. Do zero-tolerance rules have sufficient design integrity to enable the desired behaviors to be performed in every situation? Rules are usually adopted with the belief that they will be universally applicable and effective in reducing or eliminating exposure to hazards. But often there is not sufficient testing to assure that the rules can be carried out as intended in all situations. When employees are held to a zero-tolerance standard but encounter situations in which a rule cannot be followed, the worker is in a no-win situation and the organization's credibility will be damaged. For example, if there is a zero-tolerance rule regarding tying off when working at heights but a specific job requires working in a location where there is no place to tie off, the worker is in a difficult situation. He can violate the rule to get the job done, or refuse to do the job, which is culturally difficult in many organizations and may place the worker's job at risk (for example when there is an "insubordination clause" in labor contracts).
6. How are zero-tolerance policies reconciled with various observation and inspection programs, including peer-to-peer programs and "no-name/no-blame" safety observations? "What to do when..." guidance is necessary. Expectations must be clear for people at all levels. In a peer-to-peer observation program it is not appropriate to expect frontline employees to turn in co-employees when the result of zero-tolerance is severe discipline. And while enforcement is clearly a management responsibility, when a supervisor sees a violation of a zero-tolerance rule while doing a coaching observation, the expectations may not be clear. An organization may choose to deal with this type of situation in a number of ways, but whatever choice is made the key is consistency. All supervisors and managers should be clear on expectations for their response when a violation of zero-tolerance rules is observed.
7. What is expected when no rule violation is observed but subsequently (e.g., through an incident investigation or a near miss report) the determination is made that a zero-tolerance rule has been violated? There are times when no supervisor or manager has seen a zero-tolerance rule violated, but it later becomes apparent that a violation took place. This can happen, for example, during an incident investigation or incident reconstruction. Assessing zero-tolerance consequences in that situation is generally not wise for two reasons: Employing severe discipline based on inference is likely to lead to perceptions of unfairness, and doing so will also make it difficult to get information from people in subsequent cases. Applying discipline based on near-miss reports is a guaranteed way of assuring that important near-miss cases will not be reported.

## The keys to success

It is important to communicate the importance of life-critical rules and to drive performance consistent with those rules. Adopting a zero-tolerance approach can be a way to achieve this, provided that the following factors are addressed:

- Clearly define and communicate what zero-tolerance means, where it applies, and why. Any ambiguity about intentions will inevitably lead to misunderstandings, perceptions of unfair treatment, and a safety culture in which people focus on hiding things rather than committing to safe performance. Using the principle, "We have zero-tolerance for deviation from the critical procedures designed to save lives," provides a consistent way of thinking about and describing intentions behind zero-tolerance.
- Commit to consistent use of this policy: Zero-tolerance with zero exceptions. Apply the "best worker" test to be sure the organization is prepared to follow through on this. Clarify what is expected if violation of zero-tolerance rules is observed during "no blame" programs.
- Ensure that zero-tolerance rules are appropriate – not too many, focused on the most serious exposures, and able to be followed every time, in every situation. Defining zero-tolerance rules in a collaborative process that engages frontline employees is the best approach.
- Prepare supervisors and managers to use the zero-tolerance policy. Leaders must understand how to act in ways that establish credibility, build strong working relationships, and communicate effectively with frontline employees. When these leadership skills are used the zero-tolerance approach can be seen as positively contributing to worker safety rather than as a purely punitive response.