What makes a safety success?

By now, readers of this column should know I'm a big advocate of safety culture. The actual definitions of that term, however, can be as varied as the missions we perform every day. That's why it's important we have some measures in place as a litmus test for leaders looking to evaluate their culture and climate. The following six criteria can help you determine both your strongest and weakest areas regarding safety, and also give you ideas for enhancing your existing risk management programs.

First, senior leaders must be visibly committed to the safety program. That means, first and foremost, that you never tolerate injuries and losses as the price of doing business. The fact is - every Soldier and piece of equipment lost to a preventable incident increases our costs exponentially. Truly engaged leaders recognize this and do everything within their power to prevent accidents in the first place, not simply mitigate the effects of them after the fact. This requires a shift in focus from accidents, to near misses, close calls and deliberate targeting of risky behavior.

Junior leaders have to be even more engaged. With funding shortfalls and our operational drawdown nearing completion, the force is shrinking, leaving junior leaders with more day-to-day responsibility than they've perhaps ever faced. While their first instinct might be to let safety slide, they'll find they have much less work to do if their Soldiers conduct their missions safely and to standard. In addition to the human cost, a Class A or B accident consumes a lot of time on the administrative end with paperwork, investigations, and all that goes along with disability or loss of life. Safety is directly tied to efficiency, and it's incumbent on junior leaders to be active participants in the process and ensure their Soldiers understand the impact of risk management on all their activities.

Leaders should focus on safety as part of their performance. This should not be confused with making safety a punitive and linear process, however — we've spent too many years getting away from the "check the block" safety mentality to go back now. Instead, leaders should treat safety as an integrated part of the mission, with detailed steps to meet each milestone during execution. Having a plan is an integral part of establishing a functional safety culture, and while it should be focused on detail and accountability, those in charge must be careful not to micromanage. In the end, Soldiers doing the hard work every day are the owners of the unit safety program, and their leaders should respect them as such.

Soldiers have to be active participants in the process. Safety is one of those things they could easily shrug off as an unnecessary requirement designed by leadership to quash their fun. We know that's not the case, but we would do well to remember our feelings on authority at 18 or 20 years old. That's why Soldiers have to be continuously and actively involved in safety, so they learn early on the inherent value in it and have a voice in what works. When they see that risk management is essential to being a smart warrior, not a downer, we'll have won a small battle in the fight against accidental loss.

The safety program has to fit your unit culture. The Army is a regulatory organization by nature, but individual units have latitude to make the regulations work for them. The same is true of safety. It's not realistic to expect an approach that works for an aviation unit to be identical in an infantry battalion. Their distinct cultures are too far apart to force a template on one or the other, but the beauty of safety is its adaptability to the circumstances. All units share a common safety goal — elimination of preventable loss — but they don't have to take the same road there.

The final criterion is a culmination of the preceding five: The safety program must be positively perceived by all stakeholders: leader, Soldier and Civilian. Organizations need a feedback loop to stay on the edge of safety innovation, and your formation's attitude regarding the program is the most valuable feedback of all. When

your Soldiers and Civilian employees are actively engaging in the process, you've closed the loop — for now. Sustaining that momentum requires you to start all over again, constantly evaluating successes (and sometimes failures) and making changes when needed.

Now that you have the criteria, how does your unit measure up? As I've said before, evaluating safety culture is much more involved than simply comparing today's accident figures versus last year's. It's not a straightforward process, and it requires some deep thought from leadership on what has and hasn't worked in the past. I can't tell you whether you're succeeding or not; only you have the answer to that. Seeking it, however, is well worth the effort, and I challenge you to take that effort on since the risks inherent to spring and summer are already here.

Thank you for what you do every day for our Army and our Soldiers, and please let me know how I can help you reach your safety goals. Working together, we will get there!

Army Safe is Army Strong!

TIMOTHY J. EDENS
Brigadier General, USA
Commanding