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## Systematic sanctions are not the best approach to change the behaviour of a person who does not respect the rules

The issue of sanctions always sparks reactions ranging from “we’re not tough enough!” to “they’re frequent but not always fair”. However, everyone agrees on the fact that “this is not an easy question, and it’s far from being answered!”

The purpose here is not debate the status of sanctions administered under national legislation or according to a company’s internal regulations. Rather, we address the effectiveness of sanctions in changing unsafe behaviour. Punishment reflects the fact that a behaviour cannot be tolerated by the organization. The expectation is that neither the operator concerned, nor the workforce in general will repeat their action. But experience shows that while sanctions can be effective in the short term, they do not change the underlying motivations for behaviour in the long term.

A discussion of the impact of sanctions on unsafe behaviour requires an understanding of the factors that affect workplace behaviour. A simple set of

practices come into play and form the real building blocks for an effective safety culture.

### Think ‘situation’ before sanction

An operator’s behaviour is strongly influenced by their working situation and the human and organizational factors that characterize this situation (1). If an unsafe behaviour is noted, the most effective way to prevent it from happening again is to eliminate the conditions that produced it. This implies that time and thought must be given to an analysis. It could, for example, reveal that operators circumvent safety policies in order to meet two requirements: to work fast and do a good job. In this case, punishing the operator for their behaviour ignores the role of management, who must manage these tradeoffs rather than impose them on operators. The appropriate reaction to non-compliance must therefore take

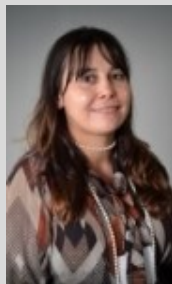
into account contributions from all levels of the organization.

### Be aware that sanctions may be counter-productive for safety

Human error is by definition unintentional (2). It is a normal action that, due to unfavourable conditions (fatigue, lack of training, poor working conditions, etc.), produces an undesired result. Punishing a mistake sanctions the result of the action but has no effect on its causes. This type of punishment does not make sense and may actually create an unfavourable climate for errors to be reported. The same can be said for other deviations that are fostered by latent causes within the organization. Although the primary intention of sanctions is to enhance safety, this approach will have the opposite effect. The organization becomes deaf and blind to its own weaknesses, and ignores opportunities to overcome them.

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### Even fair sanctions are only useful if the workforce supports them

Sanctions policies are most effective when the workforce is involved in their development. Otherwise, acceptable and unacceptable behaviours are defined without consulting the experts: operators and local supervisors. It is they who set the 'group standards' that constitute the safety barrier. Teams that are consulted and co-produce the rules for their own safety tend to exclude colleagues who adopt unsafe behaviour.

### A more effective approach: acknowledging informal contributions to safety

Sanctioning past actions does not guarantee a more responsible attitude and greater commitment to safety (3).

So what *can* we do? One answer requires knowledge of the actual work that is done. In practice, an important factor in safety performance is about the adaptations and initiatives that are taken

on a daily basis: managed safety (4). If a failure to acknowledge these contributions is accompanied by an excessive use of sanctions, managers create an additional reason for teams to become disengaged.

### Safety culture: management based on values (5), not fear

Humans adopt sustainable behaviours when the expected change is not motivated by fear but by choices that they support. Creating a culture in which the workforce shares the same values is therefore the most effective way to obtain a firm commitment to safety. The relationship of trust created by managers does the rest. This encourages operators to talk about work situations that lead to non-compliance, rather than considering them as taboo. It also becomes natural for them to be proactive in improving these situations rather than putting up with them.

#### Notes

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