

Safety is Essential to Your Success

Safety Program Review:
Who and When You Need It



Corporate safety programs play a vital role in ensuring that biological research is conducted safely, efficiently, and in compliance with national regulations and guidelines. In a biological laboratory, biosafety assessments and reviews are crucial for ensuring the safety of the facility personnel, the community, and the environment. The effectiveness and quality of a safety program is rarely evaluated, however, until a significant incident forces the issue. Numerous high-profile incidents over the last decade in the nation's flagship laboratories have demonstrated how easily performance red flags can be missed, and the severity of the consequences when the inevitable accident comes to light.

Paradox of Safety

Staff are hired to perform tasks to meet their organizational objectives and profit margins. While safety should be a priority for all workers, the daily routines and workload often conflict with best safety practices that protect the worker, the company, and the community. Corporate safety personnel continually strive for program improvements that enable a safe environment, and the success of their efforts relies heavily on the support from laboratory personnel and facilities staff as well as other company stakeholders in order to effect short- and long-term safety and quality improvements. However, corporate safety programs must compete for time and financial resources with other corporate offices, and so long as the programs appear to function "well enough", investments in program improvements are often limited. Significant improvements to program quality and operations are therefore typically reactive in nature, often as a consequence of a release or loss of valuable biological materials, an injury, or a fine.

When most companies ask for a review, it is often too late!

In our experience the most common reason a company re-evaluates their existing safety program is in response to a significant event (accident, fatality, fine, bad press, lawsuit, etc.) or a realization that continual incidents and/or lost-time injuries are getting out of control or are impacting other key metrics. While many companies may initially balk at the cost of re-evaluating their safety programs and implementing improvements, multiple analyses by the insurance industry have shown a long-term return on investment (ROI) of \$2-6 for every dollar spent in improving safety systems due to improvements in efficiency, quality, and reduced number of safety incidents. This ROI is in addition to the savings made by avoiding the costs associated with the staff medical expenses, costly infrastructure and equipment repairs, legal costs, and the intangible costs of the loss of reputation and shareholder confidence that may result when a severe incident occurs.

Status Quo and Complacency

One of the biggest challenges facing corporate safety programs is employee complacency. Complacency sets in when what you have been doing for so long without a serious incident that there is the common assumption that nothing will ever happen. However, nearly every accident investigation starts with the naïve phrase “this is the way we’ve always done it, and nothing has ever happened...”. The false sense of security is a key root cause of this problem, which highlights why constant vigilance is necessary. An independent third-party reviewer with a fresh perspective on laboratory operations and an eye for continuous improvement can help corporate safety programs identify program weaknesses before they become problems.

Moving from Reactive to Proactive Corporate Safety Programs

The cycle between complacency and over-reaction is characteristic of virtually all human endeavors, exemplified in business and corporate behavior. Safety-related processes are often plagued by this cycle, known in the financial sector as Bloomberg’s CRIC Economic Cycle.

The cycle works as follows: a crisis occurs creating panic and the urgency to react. The response to the crisis usually brings about a perceived improvement. Once the improvement has been made, people get comfortable and complacency sets in—which then leads to another crisis and the whole process repeats itself. When faced with preparing for the future, do we err on the side of doing too much or too little? It depends upon the circumstances we find ourselves in and the memories of recent events. No matter how we act at any given time we run the risk, or perhaps the certainty that we are destined to over- or under reaction at some point and we will be wrong. In retrospect, the decisions appear clear and concise, yet reactions remain reactive versus proactive.



Understanding this typical reactionary approach can help build a more proactive approach for safety programs in two ways—educating stakeholders about corporate complacency as it relates to safety and also planning improvement strategies around the natural complacency-reaction cycle. The goal is to identify strategies which get us ahead of the reactive cycle to become proactive.

Nearly all companies we work with want to focus on continuous improvement and avoid crisis modes of operation for the organization which are disruptive. Loss of productivity, downtime during crisis modes, injury-related absenteeism, rising worker's compensation premiums, all impact the company's ability to conduct business and foster low employee morale. Developing a proactive improvement plan as part of a corporate safety program will foster a culture that is safe, effective, and efficient.

There are key steps to leap from reactive to proactive corporate safety:

- Evaluate what you are currently doing in a risk-based approach using metrics where possible.
- Develop a checklist and evaluate whether you are reactive or proactive.
- What is your company willing to do to make change in the safety culture? Do you have the ability to offer significant change or only minor improvements?
- Identify what you're not doing to find your biggest opportunity to improve your safety program. For example, if you've done a lot of work getting into compliance but haven't addressed the behavioral side of safety, then focusing on behavior will likely offer you a bigger opportunity to improve than implementing more compliance initiatives.
- Review and compare to what other companies and safety professionals are doing within your industry and elsewhere.
- Prepare the information your stakeholders will need to form their decision keeping in mind the type of information that is important to each.
- Consider the benefits of hiring a third party for implementation and fresh perspectives, instead of trying to do something new yourself. Evaluate third parties based on your improvement objectives and their success in meeting similar goals with similar companies.

By definition, a proactive approach to safety will require addressing things you're not currently doing. You need an effective safety program that addresses human factors. Look for checklists, categories, and types of activities to find gaps in your program. But you'll also want to choose wisely and focus on those things that give you the biggest bang for your buck and that have proven themselves with other companies since you will only have so many opportunities for safety improvements.

MRIGlobal staff provides services to ensure safe and secure practices while they continue biological research. With more than 60 years of experience in scientific research, including 20 years managing all levels of biosafety including-Biosafety Level-3 and Animal Biosafety Level-3 laboratories, MRIGlobal has earned a reputation for delivering services with excellence in quality, integrity, and safety.

About MRIGlobal

Celebrating its 75th year of business, MRIGlobal addresses some of the world's greatest threats and challenges. Founded in 1944 as an independent, non-profit organization, we perform contract research for government, industry, and academia. Our customized solutions in national security and defense and health include research and development capabilities in clinical research support, infectious disease and biological threat agent detection, global biological engagement, *in vitro* diagnostics, and laboratory management and operations.