Doing Something is Better Than Doing Nothing...Or is It?

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There is an old saying, "Doing something is better than doing nothing." However, doing "something" isn't always the best or correct thing to do. Circumstances are situational and require different levels of action. When it comes to aviation safety, lives are at stake, and we can't afford to do "something" just for the sake of doing it.

Safety Managers frequently ask me what's the acceptable way to manage all the hazards that have been reported. Managing numerous hazards that get reported, as part of an organization's Employee Reporting Process, can be overwhelming. Often the Safety Manager has a primary job, such as flying, and finding enough time to do both is a challenge.

Applying the concept of "doing something is better than doing nothing" isn't always the answer. Doing a "little something" on each reported event can provide some temporary relief to the workload, but doesn't do much to impact the safety of an operation. Another downside surfaces when team members begin to realize that not much happens when they file reports. Eventually, they stop doing it.

Simple Rules Ensure That You're Doing the Right Thing
One alternative when faced with managing multiple safety reports is to apply simple rules. A few simple rules can ensure that you're doing the right thing rather than just "something." Here's how it works.

Simple rules are shortcut strategies that save time and energy by simplifying the way we process information. They are not universal rules, but instead tailored to the specific situation and the person using them. All of us use simple rules throughout our daily lives. If we didn't, our brains would be overloaded by the complexities of our world. For example, you may decide to only check your email three times a day. This simple rule can help manage your workload and reduce your stress level.

Simple rules have four common characteristics, according to Donald Sull, the author of *Simple Rules...How to thrive in a complex world*.

1. Simple Rules apply to a specific activity or decision, such as managing safety reports.
2. Simple Rules are tailored to the particular person using them instead of one-size-fits-all rules that apply to everyone, such as the Safety Manager.
3. Simple Rules are most effective when they apply to critical activities and decisions that represent bottlenecks to accomplishing an important goal, such as hazard identification within an aviation organization.
4. Simple Rules give concrete guidance without being overly prescriptive. It provides a way to do things better.

Simple Rules Are Always Tailored to the Specific Situation

Given that simple rules are always tailored to the specific situation, when managing safety reports try establishing a few rules in these three areas:

- Boundaries
- Prioritizing
- Stopping

Boundaries

When there is an overwhelming number of safety reports/hazards, boundary rules provide a quick way to screen for the most significant events/hazards. Boundary rules help to select which events/hazards to pursue, and which can wait until later.

For example: Move a hazard with a medium-to-high risk to the Hazard Risk Register for further action/investigation.

Prioritizing

Prioritizing rules helps to rank a group of hazards competing for attention. In the medical community this is referred to as "triage." It allows the most critical patients to be treated first. In aviation, assessing the hazards with the greatest urgency is a good way to begin the process of risk management.

For example: Hazards with both the highest probability and severity are handled within 48 hours.

Stopping

Stopping rules helps to manage the amount of time and resources devoted to each situation. In our everyday life, knowing when to stop eating helps to manage our calorie intake and is way to avoid weight gain. When managing hazards, knowing when to end an investigation or stop monitoring a hazard can also be accomplished by a stopping rule.

For example: A hazard resolution no longer requires monitoring when there have been zero reported events in a 12-month period.

Simple Rules Can Calm the Stress of Managing Safety
Although it is necessary to respond to each and every safety report, the level of action can be most effective by creating a few simple rules. Simple rules can calm the stress of managing safety in an ever-changing and complex environment. It can make the role of Safety Manager achievable amongst other competing responsibilities.

As you know, communication is key to a strong safety culture. Sharing those rules and even documenting them in your Safety Management System manual is as important as using them. When everyone on the team is aware of the rules, they know that you, as their Safety Manager, are making the best decisions and not just doing "something."

Resource
"Simple Rules...How to thrive in a complex world" by Donald Sull & Kathleen M. E. Eisenhardt
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