Eliminating the Fork in the Road
MAKING SAFE & PRODUCTIVE INTERDEPENDENT

By Peter T. Susca

"One day Alice came to a fork in the road and saw a Cheshire cat in a tree. 'Which road do I take?' she asked. 'Where do you want to go?' was his response. 'I don't know,' Alice answered. 'Then,' said the cat, 'it doesn't matter" (Carroll, 1865).

Unlike Alice, organizations typically have a very good idea of where they want to go. They create vision and goals, and muster the necessary resources to achieve these expectations. Unfortunately, business functions (e.g., operations, quality, safety, purchasing, financial), while aligned around a common business performance expectation, often go about achieving the goal by traveling down separate roads. The independent nature of many business functions' goals (e.g., performance measures, objectives, budgets) is often detrimental to operational health and efficiency. Separation, to a fault, often creates unnecessary competition, decision points and choices: essentially, forks in the road.

The focus of this article is the fork in the road where productivity and safety diverge. This fork and the resulting decision often facilitate an overwhelming amount of risk and consequently harm or loss in the workplace. More than 20 years ago, my good friend and leadership facilitator Tom Masiello drew the fork (Figure 1) during one of our management training sessions and we have used it as a powerful visual tool ever since.

The safety profession applies various methodologies to protect workers at the fork, such as telling them to stop work, changing their behavior and protecting them from harm when they go down the wrong road. These safety controls do not eliminate the fork (or the underlying organizational reasons), and therefore maintain failure modes that require commitments and investments that can be perceived as counterproductive. This article discusses the prevention and removal of the fork, rather than the process of controlling risks and harm at forks in the road.

Business Class Article Series
This article series chronicles the principles and techniques that readers can apply to transition safety and the safety profession closer to the core of what organizational leaders value. The foundational philosophy is that safety challenges stem from larger organizational issues. By understanding the core business values, OSH professionals can begin to work from the inside out to engage business leaders, rather than the typical outside-in approach to integrating safety with business. If leaders can tap into this information, they can use it to improve the organization as a whole, and move safety from a purely moral imperative to an indicator and facilitator of organizational health.

The OSH profession should widen its hierarchy of controls beyond the realm of OSH. The prevention or removal of non-value-adding forks in the road should be a higher-order value than controlling the harm from decisions made at the fork. These forks, by their nature, often create competition between the organization's high-order values and generate inherent human failure modes. At the pinnacle of the organizational hierarchy is the preventive principle that workers should not have to make decisions about which value comes first on a given day.

Organizational Heroes

Supervisors often depend on workers to create success in challenging situations. Typically these situations exist when it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to juggle all of an organization's separate expectations at the operational front line. These jugglers often decide that balls must be dropped and the defined edges created by rules and procedures must be rounded to achieve success in the moment. This situation is often created by the separate expectations of the management team not being integrated and realistic at the front line of work: the creation of an inherent poor decision fork.

Since performance is most often measured by outcomes (e.g., happy customers, number of units completed, no injuries), workers can achieve production and service goals in an unsafe manner and, as long as they do not get injured, they appear to be successful. Workers who consistently get difficult jobs done without being injured are viewed as organizational heroes. They are often touted by leaders as example-setters who go the extra mile to save the day.

Peter T. Susca
Peter T. Susca, M.S., is a principal at OpX Safety and has 35 years of environment, health and safety, business leadership and process improvement expertise. He has served in various EHS technical and senior management positions in large multinational corporations. He has developed EHS management systems, rating systems, auditing and auditor certification programs, risk assessment processes, educational management systems, executive EHS development programs, quality and EHS systems integration, incident investigation and high-risk industry fatality prevention programs for a wide variety of clients. Susca is a member of ASSP's Connecticut Valley Chapter. Reach him at opxsafety@cox.net, www.opxsafety.com or connect with him on LinkedIn.
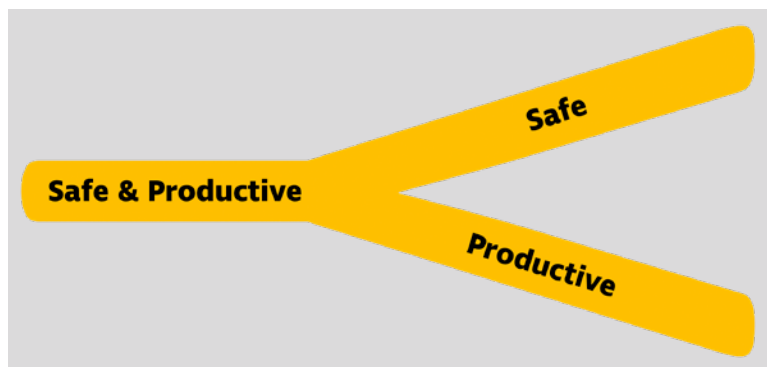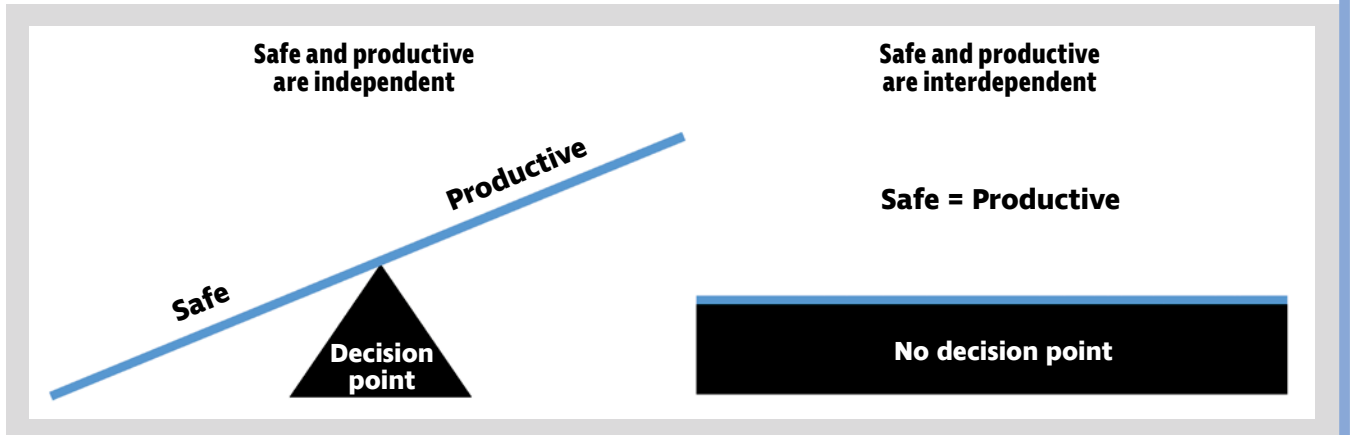
FIGURE 1
THE FORK IN THE ROAD

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SAFE & PRODUCTIVE

At the fork, one route is safe and the other is productive. These forks exist because safety and productivity, although they may at times be in parallel, are often in opposition.

During a presentation to a large group of regional managers for a service company, I showed a photo of a man scaling a chain-link fence using a stack of pallets for access. I asked the group of leaders, "What kind of worker operates like this in your company?" Knowing this was a safety presentation, most said that this worker was problematic or unsafe.

I told them the backstory of my example. This worker was one of many service staff members who their organization sends to customer sites to conduct surveys. Typically, a key holder would meet the service person to provide access to the facility. On this occasion, the service person arrived and waited half an hour for the key holder. Because this worker is dedicated to getting the job done and taking care of the best interests of the company, he decided (not for the first time) to do what was necessary to make the company and the customer happy.

I concluded the story with, "Ladies and gentlemen, this guy is your best worker, your hero. He is the one who always makes success out of impending failure and never fails to please the customer. He's a productive problem solver and his safety (his lack of injuries) has always been stellar. Wouldn't you like all of your workers to be like him?" You could have heard a pin drop.

This example was my lead-in to breaking the managers into groups to start the process of taking the fork out of their road. I challenged them to eliminate this decision for their field staff in a manner that was both productive and safe for the company, the customer and the workers.

The Fork in the Road

Workers often must make decisions when the road they are travelling down splits. At the fork, one route is safe and the other is productive. These forks exist because safety and productivity, although they may at times be in parallel, are often in opposition. This frontline decision dilemma is created by unbalanced business decisions higher up in the organization (Susca, 2019).

Productive will be loosely defined herein as delivering improved results and benefits (e.g., faster, easier, pleasing, inexpensive, efficient). Productive is often based on the individual's perception at the time of the decision. Counterproductive, therefore, becomes the perception of slow, costly, inefficient, displeasing, extra or unnecessary steps, and profit and revenue reducing actions.

How often do safety and health controls in an organization align with this definition of counterproductive? In my experience, the answer is most of the time. With productivity typically being top of mind organizationally and personally, the amount of effort and resources that it takes to be consistently safe (counterproductive) becomes overwhelming. Therefore, to make safety truly good for business, it is imperative that organizations prevent or remove all unnecessary forks in the road.

Because the most productive route and the safest route are typically not the same or interdependent, a decision point is created. Most safety controls used in organizations today create a negative impact on productivity. For example, it would be much quicker, easier and more profitable for a residential roofing company to operate without a fall protection program.

As in the fence climber example, going down the productive road tends to be the easiest and most frequently rewarding for many workers. This decision is reinforced when the productive road has been traveled routinely without any serious safety ramifications. The productive road, in the mind of the decision-maker, then becomes safe enough and productive. Many seasoned and respected workers have died because the odds finally caught up with them while habitually traveling the productive road.

Balancing Safe & Productive

When safe and productive are not interdependent, a decision point exists that forms the fulcrum of a safe versus productive seesaw (Figure 2). When this dynamic exists, it is difficult to sustain a balance between safe and productive. Therefore, when one value is up, the other is usually down. For example, when a worker decides to stop a process due to a

significant safety risk, safe goes up while productive goes down. During the last few days of the month when the company needs to ship product to meet customer demands and financial goals, productivity goes up and safety typically goes down. With these two values in opposition, one is always put at risk to elevate the other. Couple this situation by measuring productivity and safety by results (outcomes) and you have the makings of a perpetually reactive and risky business environment.

Safe but not productive is ultimately unsafe. To move an organization out of this reactive seesaw of values, safe and productive must become interdependent. When safe and productive are interdependent, the safe aspect becomes essential to productivity. This interdependence is similar to two distinctly different elements combining to create a chemical compound, a blend of the atoms of the elements that results in a completely different substance. In this case, as a compound, safe and productive become more beneficial and stable in the work environment. When these two values become a compound, the result has the potential to increase productivity, safety, profitability, engagement and sustainability. Ideally the dynamic created when safe and productive are interdependent is shortcut proof. The test for interdependence is this: if you take away the safety provision, it makes the approach less productive.

Making Safe & Productive Interdependent

What does the interdependent compound of safe and productive look like? Automotive windshield glass is a good example. Windshield glass is laminated (safety) glass. The other windows in the vehicle are typically made of tempered glass. When damaged, tempered glass fragments into many pieces and, thus, is not used for windshields because it results in poor visibility and harmful exposure. Laminated windshield glass is designed to be both safe and transparent. There is no good reason today to replace a windshield with a less safe, more productive (e.g., transparent) alternative. In the case of the windshield, its safety, by design, is literally transparent to its productivity.

Workers and first-line supervisors desperately need our help in making their jobs more tenable. They are being asked to juggle many separate management expectations (e.g., safety, production, worker satisfaction, delivery, quality) that are overwhelming because they are separate. These separate expectations are created by functions such as OSH that are not working to combine initiatives and expectations with other functions and operations prior to being handed to supervision.

In a production or service environment, there are many collaborative opportunities between functions that are often working independently. For example, reliability groups are focused on predicting and preventing equipment failure. Their responsibility is to keep critical processes up and running with minimal cost and downtime. Orga-

nizations often make decisions to allow equipment to run to failure rather than take nonproductive time to lubricate and replace elements that are prone to wear and failure. In this case, the seesaw appears to be tipped with production up and reliability down. Worker safety is closely linked to reliability. When a production-critical process fails, maintenance staff will be called in to save the day. Repair workers will be under a high level of production pressure to get the process up and running to save production. In this case, a business decision to preserve productivity places safety down and production up on the seesaw. High severity hazards, low-level controls coupled with pressured repair workers is a serious injury or fatality waiting to happen. OSH staff teaming with reliability and process engineers can readily create solutions that are productive and safe for workers. (See *PSJ* April 2018, pp. 16-18, "Making Safety More Efficient and Effective" for additional examples.)

Separate safety and productivity measures, goals and objectives along with personal performance accountability also create forks in the road. To drive and sustain an interdependent approach, organizations must evolve their metrics and accountability accordingly. Performance measures must align and integrate safety risk reduction with productivity improvement. Goals and objectives should require the teaming of functional and operational staff, and success should be determined and judged by those on the front line.

Conclusion

It is common in the OSH profession to believe that to be safe an organization or an individual must sacrifice productivity. We often believe that sacrificing productivity (e.g., impeding workflow, spending hefty sums on controls) is how leaders must show their commitment to safety. Why must an organization sacrifice productivity to be safe? This paradigm of required sacrifice should be abandoned by the OSH profession if it truly wants to become an organizational success partner.

There are many win-win productivity and safety opportunities to be identified and created. Organizations need OSH professionals to build bridges between their peer functions and operations to create a more interdependent approach to managing business risk and sustainable success. All such challenges and solutions must be driven by the local work teams and supervision supported by functional staff. Eliminating the fork in the road will provide sustainable health to workers and the business as a whole. **PSJ**

References
Carroll, L. (1865) *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. New York, NY: MacMillan.
Susca, P. (2018, Apr.). Making safety more efficient and effective. *Professional Safety, 63*(4), 20-22.
Susca, P. (2019, Apr.). Balanced organizational decision-making. *Professional Safety, 64*(4), 16-19.