

Operational Discipline: Does Your Organization Do the Job Right Every Time?

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Introduction

DuPont defines Operational Discipline (or OD) as, "...the deeply rooted dedication and commitment by every member of an organization to carry out each task the right way every time." Expressed more succinctly, OD means "Everyone Do It Right Every Time."



Quite often, focus is first placed on defining "everyone" or even "every time," while concurrently attempting to describe what type of culture this might suggest. However, the first logical step toward increasing operational discipline is to focus first on the "it" — that is, what is the job, the mission, the series of tasks and reports that people are actually expected to do?

Most organizations, especially those handling hazardous materials or performing hazardous operations, invest considerable time and effort in preparing written instructions and procedures. Written procedures have many functions, including enabling consistent operations and behaviors, and serve as a vehicle for codifying technology, best practices and experience. So why do so many companies find that employees are not following these instructions and procedures?

DuPont has developed a simple but effective eight-step approach that has been proven successful in leading manufacturing organizations to a state of greater operational discipline. Implementation of this methodology increases awareness of written procedures and enables a higher degree of consistency in operational execution and subsequent experiential behaviors throughout an organization.



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EIGHT STEPS TOWARD OPERATIONAL DISCIPLINE

Step 1: Be Convinced Operational Discipline is Needed.

The greater the risk factors in an organization's operations, the greater the need for a strong culture of operational discipline. A review of some of the operating practices of the most hazardous industries, including airline transportation and nuclear power generation, shows that operational discipline is built into operations through check sheets, step-by-step sign-offs and independent verification of the most critical steps by a co-worker or supervisor. However, as in DuPont's operations, checklists, sign-offs and other observation approaches rely upon workers' doing the job right — without taking shortcuts and following required procedures.

It stands to reason that if business would suffer from human errors leading to safety incidents, quality and reliability issues, poor process optimization and higher costs, then it is probably time to implement specific changes to create stronger operational discipline. Once management is convinced that the prevailing operational environment is not strong enough to minimize, if not eliminate, poor quality, process and cost issues as obstacles to achieving business metrics and goals, the organization is ready to move on to the next step.

Step 2: Assess the Current State.



Exhibit 2: 11 Characteristics of Operational Discipline

Over the years, DuPont has developed a number of diagnostic tools to improve operational discipline. One of these is a set of 11 characteristics that are used in assessing an organization's OD culture. These characteristics are depicted in Exhibit 2.

An assessment team provides site management with feedback for each of the 11 OD characteristics. Strengths and improvement opportunities are highlighted, as are best practices at other sites.

Other assessment tools include a comprehensive self assessment methodology and an on-line survey.

A high degree of trust is needed to obtain a realistic picture. With these factors in mind, it is recommended that all organizations use more than one assessment tool and use them frequently. Management has the right to apply the tools most appropriate for its situation.

Step 3: Develop a Comprehensive Roll-Out Plan.

With every change initiative, especially those that affect the organization's fundamental culture, detailed and comprehensive planning is essential. An OD improvement plan must be consistent with the company's values and management must be credible and authentic in its communication and implementation.

Step 4: Focus on the "It".

"It" refers to the work or day-to-day tasks to be performed. For there to be a single right way to do the job, the "it" is typically described in instructions or procedures. A robust process of technical review and employee involvement combined with talented procedure writers and a document management/control system is absolutely essential to building a culture of Operational Discipline. It is a continuous process of improvement.

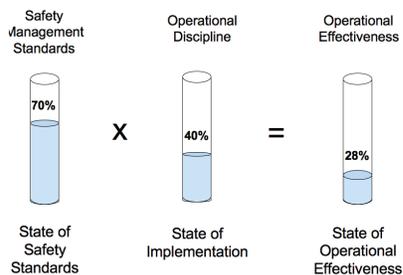


Exhibit 3: Safety performance is a function of safety management systems and level of execution.

If management instructs its employees to follow procedures when the procedures do not represent the best knowledge and experience of the facility, employees are placed in an untenable position and faced with two options:

1. Obey and follow the bad procedure and get a bad result
2. Ignore the procedure and do the task a "better way," inviting negative consequences for failing to follow management instructions.

Procedures should contain the cumulative body of knowledge expressed in writing that instructs how a particular task is to be performed each and every time.

They should be the documented and codified best practices that represent the organization's best and most complete knowledge and experience. Management should not insist upon compliance to procedures until the procedures are of sufficient high quality to merit compliance.

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Step 5: Establish Priorities.

All procedures are not created equal and employees understand that to operate a facility or perform their work safely, some procedures and regulations are more important than others. The place to start is compliance with the most important procedures. DuPont, and many other companies, compile and publish a list of the most critical safety rules. This list should be highly visible, with framed copies in all employees work areas and gathering points. Contractors should also be fully aware of the rules and should be expected to comply. These rules become a line in the sand and the organization assumes a stance of zero tolerance for any willful violation.

Step 6: Strengthen Discipline Processes.

Although operational discipline can and should be a positive element in an organization's culture, it is important to make a clear statement of what will happen if individuals elect to not follow procedures. Many facilities use a process called progressive discipline that establishes negative consequences for failing to comply as expected.



Exhibit 4. As this two-axis matrix shows, the severity of discipline increases as the impact of an incident and the willfulness of intent increases.

the communication of the system to all employees as well as its day-to-day implementation.

Typical steps in a progressive discipline system are 1) verbal warning, 2) written warning, 3) probation, 4) suspension with or without pay, and 5) termination.

The discipline system must apply to all employees, from shop floor to shift technicians to supervisors, managers and superintendents. It is most effective when line management is responsible for

Step 7: Implement.

Implementation of an Operational Discipline plan should be as simple as possible. The implementation plan and expectations for behavior must be communicated clearly to all employees. Clear accountability for key tasks should be assigned. Timelines should be established and deadlines met. Managers should solicit feedback from employees to know what progress is being made and where there might be difficulties or misunderstandings. The most important considerations are management consistency, exhaustive two-way communication and prompt response to questions or concerns.

Step 8: Audit, Audit, Audit.

While Step 2 in the process is to assess the current state, the last process step revisits the initial assessment and audit to trigger the next round of planning and improvement. The same (or possibly different) assessment/audit tools can be used, but it is important to be able to determine whether true progress is being made by a comparison with prior results.

Conclusion

The word "discipline" can evoke a strong negative reaction even though, when coupled as "Operational Discipline," it is intended to describe a culture of order and predictability. It is in everyone's best interest to view Operational Discipline in a positive light; an important enabler in the journey towards Operational Excellence. When an organization needs to create or strengthen its OD culture, the eight-step process described above has been shown to be an effective and successful approach when led with authenticity, sincerity and commitment. Continuous effort by management will be required to sustain the gains.

For more information on DuPont Sustainable Solutions and its Operational Discipline consulting services, call us today at 1-800-532-SAFE (7233) or visit us at www.safety.dupont.com



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