

# SAFETY BULLETIN

Ensure your Team is Prepared!

## The Importance of Matching Policy & Practice

Fire Departments write safety policies to prevent accidents and to comply with safety mandates. A safety policy is a foundation that addresses a risk and the appropriate way to mitigate that risk. Once a policy has been written, departments publish the policy and then train the employees on the policy.

Policies are developed to change or guide work behavior in the safest manner. The changes the policy creates in work behavior ideally will produce a work practice that is significantly similar to the policy. High Reliability Organizations constantly compare written policy to work practice. The goal is for the policy and practice to coincide.

However, it is common in the work place for the policy and practice to have some variance. This variance is known as drift, or cultural drift. Drift can be the result of a policy error or practice deviation. Occasionally a safety policy lacks the insight of the work practice reality. Policies are frequently written in a sterile environment - at a desk imagining how to best conduct work in the field.

For example it is common for fire departments to have apparatus spacing protocols when two emergency apparatus are both responding with lights and sirens. A typical spacing protocol may require a specific number of feet between the lead apparatus and the trailing apparatus. The intent of the policy is to prevent the trailing apparatus from rear-ending the lead apparatus. With the latest, significant improvements in braking technology we have found that some new apparatus can stop in half the distance required by older apparatus.

Firefighters could be in compliance with a policy that does not take into consideration this new technology. If an older apparatus is following a new piece of equipment, a rear-end accident could occur even though the drivers are in full compliance with the written policy. An evolved organization would determine in the accident investigation that the driver was not at fault, but that the policy was in error.

Only after it is confirmed that the written policy is not flawed can a safety committee move forward and investigate the human practice. This approach to matching policy and practice allows employees the opportunity to challenge a policy but not violate the policy. A standing rule should be to comply with or challenge and change, but don't defy policies. An important goal of every accident investigation should be to promote policy and practice concurrence.

If safety committees only examine the work practice and not the written policy the organization runs two critical risks. The organization may from time to time only be fixing blame and not fixing the policy and the organization will lose the support of the employees when the written policy misses the mark.