**Lives v. livelihoods (aka safety v. production)**

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As the COVID-19 pandemic stretches on and on, battle lines are being formed.

In one camp, calls grow louder for re-opening businesses to avert what could be a cataclysmic recession or depression. People need to work and make a living.

In the other, public health experts want to put the brakes on a business roll-out or recovery. Moving too fast risks sparking a new wave of cases and deaths, and perhaps a second or third surge in the virus. Lives are at stake.

Speed has always been the enemy of safety. You can’t slow down the line and still meet quotas. Workers race and take shortcuts to get jobs finished before clocking out. Truckers fight fatigue, bad weather and stress to meet deadlines and keep to schedules.

This is the ancient safety v. production quandary. Which comes first? “Safety First” is the classic exhortation, but workers know it’s not true. Profits, customers and performance bonuses trump protections. Safety precautions just slow things down.

This is a false dichotomy, as the World Health Organization states. It is not win-lose, either/or, this or that.

Business leaders who sincerely value safety and walk the talk will tell you: their safest plants are the most efficient and reliable; and their most productive plants are the safest. Safety and production are interconnected, interdependent. The same goes for safety and quality, customer relations, human resources, supply chain management, brand reputations, media image and stakeholder value.

Best-in-class companies implement management systems, controls, checks and balances to ensure health and safety is interconnected with the other business operations. There are no silos. There are no mixed, confusing messages: “We put safety first, always, but we gotta get product out the door or else we close our doors.”

Instead, best-in-class companies take the time to learn from what goes right when there are no safety incidents 99% of the time. And they apply what they learn to business operations. Safety enhances business capacity; it does not constrict it. This is not an easy task, to be sure. It requires a culture of collaboration, communication and innovation. Not mere compliance. Safety policing, the old cop on the floor beat, yields limited returns. Engaging employees, tapping their experience and knowledge, offers expansive returns.

Unless manhandled and manipulated from above, front-line workers can tell you the safe way to do a job, where the next accident will occur and why, and how to do a job most efficiently.

Just ask them.