

## **Working Safely Goes Against Human Nature**

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“Do the right thing.” “Just use common sense.” “Nobody wants to get hurt, so use your training and follow the procedure.” “The PPE we’ve provided will protect you, so wear it.” “If you continue to take short cuts and other risks, you are going to get seriously hurt.”

We can all agree that safety is a good thing, a moral imperative. That agreement has given rise to a widespread, yet mistaken belief that employees will work safely because it is the right thing to do and surely, no one wants to get hurt. This false assumption becomes apparent when incident analyses continue to identify causal factors like poor judgment and erroneous decision-making, thus negating the wishful thinking that safety is instinctive. This paradox poses a great challenge. In the pursuit of protecting people, property, and the environment, those of us striving to improve safety will become more successful by gaining greater understanding of decision making, personal and group motivations, mental states, human nature, and essentially, why people do the things they do. Gaining greater insight can be accomplished by evaluating the counter-intuitive premise that “Working safely goes against human nature.”

While it is impossible to fully understand what motivates people to act, as safety leaders we are compelled to learn about human dynamics and behavioral motivations. Without delving into complex theories, we must advance beyond the simplistic behavioral approach that presumes we respond to basic stimuli the same as lower-level animals. Too many organizations have relied too heavily on this simplistic behavioral approach, which has resulted in wasted resources that produced minimal, and oftentimes damaging, results.

### **Decision-Making Factors**

To advance our understanding of employee actions, *cognitive* models must be used that recognize the ability of humans to *think*, and that their behavior will be the result of the myriad inputs of reasoning, logic and decision-making. There are innumerable input factors that affect our decisions and actions, including, but not limited to:

- Education/Training/Aptitude
- Communication
- Interpersonal Dynamics—Heredity/Culture/Personality/Attitudes/Habits
- Workgroup Dynamics—Participation/Peer Pressure/Conflict Resolution

- Task Design/Management of Change
- Organizational Culture—Integrity/Ethics/Value of Safety
- Leadership
- Perceptions of Risk/Risk Taking/Risk Aversion
- Empowerment/Autonomy/Authority
- Accountability/Expectations/Performance Criteria
- Mental and Emotional State/Consciousness/Situational Awareness

Each of these decision-making factors is an extremely complex independent field of study, and each must be taken into consideration when evaluating individual, group, and organizational decision-making and resulting actions that were taken. While it is impractical to evaluate these decision-making factors individually for most decisions, a thorough after-the-fact evaluation is warranted on major decisions that adversely affected safety. More importantly, there are effective methods to positively influence these decision-making factors collectively, so that decisions will result in desired, safe actions.

Unfortunately, overly simplistic behavioral-based approaches rarely take these decision-making factors into consideration, and primarily focus their labor-intensive efforts on task performance exclusively. Trying to force adults to act a certain way is futile, especially if the actions are in conflict with their instinctive nature. We will have much greater success if we focus more efforts on the decision-making factors collectively in such a way that human beings with the ability to think and reason will have internal motivation to more willingly embrace safety as part of their instinctive nature.

## **How to Positively Affect Decision-Making Factors**

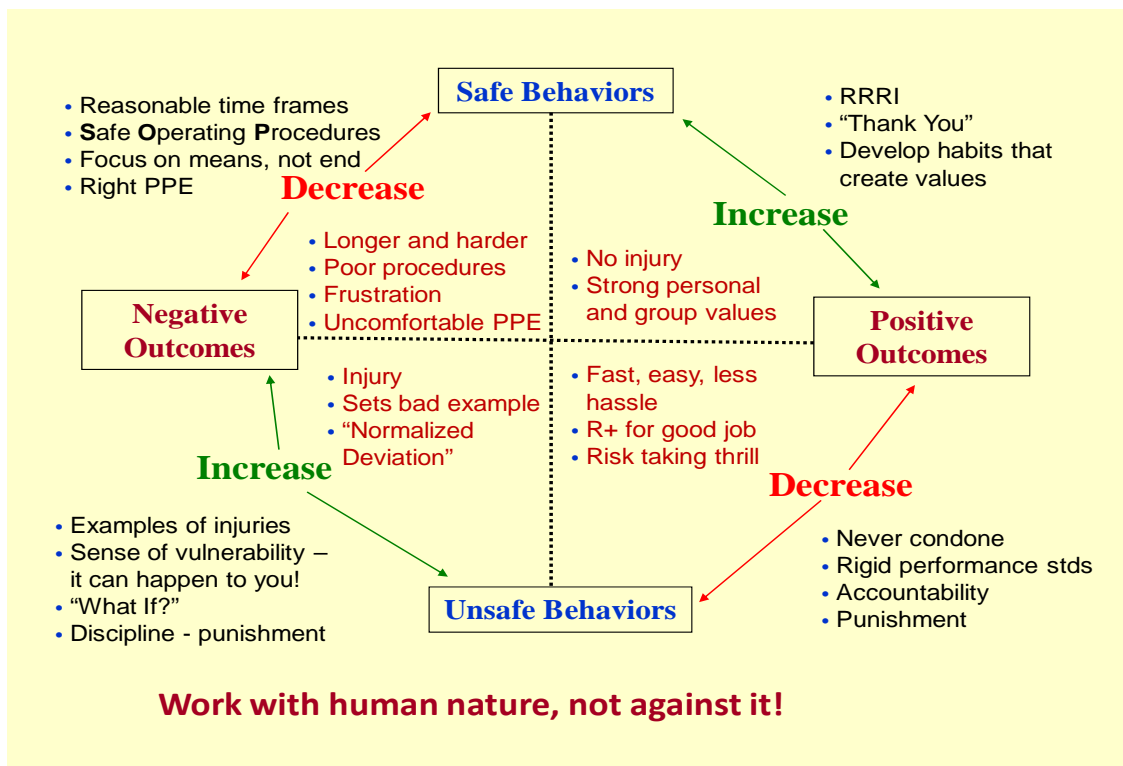
After taking all the decision-making factors into consideration, decisions are made and actions are taken. When actions are taken, resulting outcomes are experienced. The more powerful the outcomes, the more they affect the repeatability of the behavior. Behaviors that produce positive results are most likely to be repeated; those that produce negative results will be avoided or discontinued. When outcomes of behavior are positive, we believe we have made a good decision and that our actions are right. These decisions and related behaviors may produce “feel good” results, but that does not mean the behavior is safe; it may well be unsafe.

If it is mid-July in south Louisiana and an employee has to perform a job that requires him to don a splash-proof suit, gloves, boots, and face shield, the inputs that affect his actions are important, as are the outcomes following the actions. If the employee chooses to not wear all of the personal protective equipment (PPE) because it is too hot and cumbersome, and he is able to complete the job without incident, in his mind he will have experienced positive outcomes. He may have even taken other short cuts that further strengthen the positives. So, doing the job in an unsafe manner produced positive benefits that will reinforce the same unsafe actions in the future.

Conversely, doing the job according to procedure and wearing all PPE is really hot and uncomfortable, and the job takes longer to do it the safe way. So, doing the job safely produces negative outcomes that discourage safe work and encourage unsafe work. The fact that no incident happened is a weak positive outcome. They think that “It’s not going to happen to me,” and if they are really careful when taking short cuts, they won’t be hurt. And, in most cases they are right!

This leads to the conclusion that *working safely goes against human nature!* Working safely almost always takes longer and requires more effort (negatives), whereas working unsafely is most often easier, faster, and less of a hassle (positives). Experience teaches us to repeat behaviors that maximize rewards, and avoid situations that maximize punishment.

Therefore, the objective is to align with human nature by encouraging safe behavior and discouraging unsafe behavior. To do so, positive and negative outcomes must be used to successfully influence behavior as shown in Figure 1 below:



**Figure 1. Positive and Negative Outcomes to Influence Behavior**

Referencing Figure 1 above, each quadrant will be reviewed to see how we can align our efforts with human decision-making factors.

Discourage/Decrease the *Positive Outcomes of Unsafe Behavior* (Bottom right quadrant)

*What are some positive outcomes of unsafe behavior?*

There are many positive outcomes of unsafe behavior, and they are quite powerful motivators. Performing tasks in an unsafe manner is usually faster, easier, and involves less hassle. Make no mistake; these positive outcomes are unfortunate realities that must be acknowledged straight up.

Often, unsafe work is positively reinforced and rewarded. When jobs are completed early, or when problems are miraculously fixed, there can be a tendency to overlook the "how" and focus only on the results. The damaging messages sent by recognizing and rewarding "unsafe

success” can undermine safety and credibility in big ways. This is a perfect example where the “means does not justify the end.”

Another positive outcome of unsafe actions can be the thrill of risk taking. Some people like taking risks for a variety of reasons. Some like the chemical rush of adrenaline and dopamine. Some like to challenge authority and enjoy getting over on the boss or the establishment. For these people, their internal motives are very much out of kilter with good safety, and their actions can be very dangerous.

#### Discourage / Decrease the *Negative Outcomes of Safe Behavior* (Top left quadrant)

*What are some negative outcomes of safe behavior?*

Many of the negative outcomes of safe behavior are essentially the opposite of positive outcomes of unsafe behavior. That is, the safe way almost always takes longer, involves more work, and can be fraught with more paperwork, equipment, approvals, and procedures - all of which are seen by many as a big hassle. They may not see the value in all the extra work.

Employees may be expected to follow procedures that are overly burdensome, excessively redundant, poorly written, ineffectively communicated, and generally inadequate. Employees may have other ways to get the work done that they think are better. They may or may not think their work procedure is safer, but they do believe it is safe enough, and if they are really careful, they can get by; and in most cases they will complete the tasks without incident. The more they get away with short-circuiting the procedure, the more they will come to believe it is perfectly fine to do it “their way,” knowing full well they are not following the procedure.

Suppose a machine is running poorly. A section is jamming, and every time the jam has to be cleared, a rigorous lockout procedure has to be performed to “safely” clear the jam. Over a period of repetitiously going through the correct procedure, workers become frustrated. This frustration can lead to looking for short cuts. These types of issues are aggravated when employees have brought the jamming issue up before, they know what it will take to fix the machine, but for whatever reasons the machine has not been fixed. This is clearly a very negative outcome for forcing people to “do the right thing, no matter what.”

Another straightforward example of a negative outcome of safety is the wearing of PPE. Most people understand that PPE is needed in some cases. However, the fact remains that some PPE is very uncomfortable, cumbersome, hot, and restrictive. They do not like using the PPE over and over when they have never seen the benefit of doing so.

#### Encourage / Increase the *Positive Outcomes of Safe Behavior* (Top right quadrant)

*What are some positive outcomes of safe behavior?*

The most obvious answer is freedom from injury. Nobody wants to get hurt, so this is a powerful motivational factor for safe behavior, right? For many people, the fear of getting hurt is a powerful motivation that compels them to take stringent measures to protect themselves. But, for many other people the fear of getting hurt does not motivate them enough to take the necessary precautions to protect themselves and others around them. For some, there is a mindset that, “It won’t happen to me”; they think they are in control, unable to envision the real possibilities that could bring them harm. These realities are manifest continually on our roadways. We see people tailgating at 75 mph, weaving in and out of traffic, risking the lives of themselves and others.

Another positive outcome of safe behavior is pride in knowing that you are doing the right thing every time. This is very positive on a personal level and even more positive when experienced as a group. When strong safety values are developed within groups, many positive benefits will result. Morale and camaraderie is high, constructive safety feedback is willingly given and accepted, the mantra “Be your brother’s keeper” is seen in action, and the risk of getting hurt is dramatically reduced. It can be difficult to find groups that truly exemplify these traits, but where they exist, they should be highly recognized and emulated.

#### Encourage / Increase the *Negative Outcomes of Unsafe Behavior* (Bottom left quadrant)

*What are some negative outcomes of unsafe behavior?*

The most obvious answer is getting hurt. Once an injury happens, this reality becomes crystal clear. Some people have developed the ability to proactively assess risks and hazards to which they are exposed, to properly plan safe means of action, to successfully execute their plan, and to review their actions so they can learn to improve in the future. They have learned to harness all the Decision-Making Factors positively so their actions are always safe. As anyone interested in safety improvement knows well, these high-level skills are not well developed in many employees. The lessons are not learned proactively, and the harsh realities are felt too late, after the incident and resultant injury or illness.

Another negative outcome of unsafe behavior is an environment where the risk of injury and illness is greatly heightened. This high-risk environment may or may not be readily apparent. There are some environments where unsafe activities and exposed hazards are ubiquitous; where injuries would be expected to occur. And, there are other environments where everything would seem to be in order, but where insidious risks are present. It is where there is a serious commitment to safety, but where unsafe practices have crept into the work over time. This phenomenon is realized when out of the blue, the “big one” happens. This phenomenon is called “Normalized Deviation.” It’s when short cuts and other unsafe practices that were once recognized as unacceptable have become so commonly accepted that bad habits have developed. These normalized deviations are not normally on the radar screen, not normally detected by auditors or inspectors, and are often condoned by leadership. Normalized Deviation is often a “don’t ask, don’t tell” situation. It is extremely difficult to identify and correct these normalized deviations – it takes great expertise and immense trust to shed light on these deep-rooted safety deficiencies, and much courage is required to correct these problems

Punishment is another negative outcome. Where strong accountability systems are in place, discipline can be used effectively. But, some organizations use punishment as a quick solution to place blame, thinking they are solving problems. In reality, they are likely responding to symptoms of problems, and never actually get to the true causes of the problem. Regardless as to how it is used, punishment or discipline is considered a negative outcome.

### **Alignment with Human Nature**

#### How to Successfully Influence Behavior by Using Positive and Negative Outcomes That Encourage Safe Behavior and Discourage Unsafe Behavior

Now that a better understanding of these complex “human nature” issues has been gained, strategies for improvement must be sought. In some cases, these strategies are relatively simple and straightforward, and in other cases they require special expertise and extra effort. Regardless,

all of these solutions are being successfully used by leading organizations to continuously improve safety performance.

Honestly assess how well you and your organization are doing on the following:

- Never condone unsafe practices or situations. All involved and affected personnel cannot positively reinforce, ignore, or implicitly approve unsafe situations. All the safety success in the world can be undermined by reckless acts of condoning. The magnitude of the damage this causes to safety culture is not fully recognized, understood, or addressed. Unless this concept of “never condoning” is embraced, the damage caused to safety culture is virtually impossible to overcome.
- High-quality performance standards must be developed and followed because they make sense, are effective, and are widely accepted by affected personnel because they understand the reasoning behind them. People see value in taking extra steps for safety’s sake. Adherence to safe work practices is the expected norm. Expectations are clearly understood and accepted by all personnel, and everyone is expected to hold each other accountable to those expectations. Deviations are handled immediately, in a direct manner, with appropriate consequences certain.
- Stop creating schedules where the time pressure essentially forces people to cut corners. Reset the clock and establish reasonable time frames that allow for flexibility and contingencies. Many schedules are based on everything going just right, and it rarely does. Evaluate the message that is sent when tight time schedules are set. Consider what actions are being encouraged when unrealistic deadlines are established.
- Focus on means, not the end result. There are many ways to get desired results, and people will respond in very creative ways to deliver those results, even if they have to circumvent safety and expose themselves to dangerous situations. Worse yet, when only the end result is rewarded, these unsafe practices not only persist, they expand. Let it be known that unrealistic results will be identified and challenged. Look for and reward instances where legitimate extra time was taken to do the job right, even though the schedule was not met.
- Procure and use the best and most comfortable PPE available.
- Identify and deal with risk takers, authority resisters, and other individuals whose mental state is contributing to sub-par performance, thus putting themselves and others at risk.
- When people do things right, let them know. Thank them privately and publicly – individually and in groups. Use rewards, recognition, reinforcement, and incentives to encourage safe behavior and discourage unsafe behavior. Do not mistakenly reward undesired behavior. Nurture good habits that lead to strong individual and group values that result in a stronger safety culture. Nip bad habits in the bud.
- Foster a mindset of “vulnerability” where everyone realizes that, “It can happen to me.” Everyone should constantly ask “what if” questions and take appropriate precautionary measures to avoid adverse consequences. Showing examples and hearing testimonies of how others have had their lives changed or how families have lost loved ones is a powerful tool to drive these messages.
- Heighten awareness and identify where “Normalized Deviation” is occurring. Build trust so that key employees can be used to confront and resolve normalized deviations that are deep-rooted and occur under the radar.
- When all positive and proactive approaches are tried and exhausted, discipline (in the form of punishment) can be used. Punishment can be used in positive and creative ways that will help ensure that performance will be dramatically improved. Requiring a person having such

issues to take a few days off to self-evaluate, discuss with family, and write out an improvement plan can be the seminal time that turns their performance around.

All of these concepts, solutions, and ideas are to be developed in open collaboration with all stakeholders. Give workers some actual control over their work environment. Using outcomes to influence behavior will never work unless there is widespread participation and buy-in.

## **Conclusion**

The intent of this paper is that the counter-intuitive premise, “Working Safely Goes Against Human Nature” will be considered, understood, and accepted, and that intense efforts will be made to better align safety and human nature. The concepts and strategies reviewed herein present exigent opportunities for improved safety performance and stronger safety cultures. That is, these opportunities are urgent and they will require significant effort to bring about desired improvements.

Human nature is nebulous, and one would be unwise to profess to have a silver bullet that will control human actions; that which has baffled so many in the pursuit of safety success. But we must always try to:

“Do all the good you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
To all the souls you can,  
In every place you can,  
At all the times you can,  
With all the zeal you can,  
As long as ever you can”

*-John Wesley*