

Safety in the Bizarro World

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“If you always do what you did, you will always get what you got!”

As safety professionals, we are all looking for different ways to effectively communicate with others to develop employee ownership for the safety efforts within our organization. We review and dissect both the traditional and conventional approaches to safety, hoping to find the one-size-fits-all magic bullet.

There is no magic bullet, no one right way of doing things! But, there is safety in the Bizarro World.

Bizarro World

Many of us have heard of the term “Bizarro.” For some of us, it takes us back to our childhood days where many glorious hours were spent deeply engrossed in Superman comics. What Superman comic book fan can ever forget the first time they saw Bizarro Superman. The guy just looked weird, and talked funny. Of more recent vintage was the discussion that occurred on the Seinfeld television series about the bizarro characters. But what exactly does “bizarro” mean?

The most common definition of bizarro is something that is considered the opposite of normal, something unconventional, something other than what we know as true. Remember, “Perception is Reality.” However, everyone has their own reality based on their circumstances and experiences, not on yours. Therefore, your perception of reality may be bizarre to others. There are as many different realities as there are individual perceptions. The trick is to agree on what perceptions really are, and therefore, establish what the realities, or facts, really are. When working with teams, we often adopt the perspective of “We reject your reality and choose to insert our own!”

The following is a discussion of traditional and conventional approaches versus bizarro safety.

Answers vs. Questions

One of the common organizational perceptions of our workforce is that we, the safety professionals, have all the answers. Not sure of what the OSHA regulations state? Ask the Safety Department. Are the fall protection procedures established correct? Ask the safety guy. Then, to confirm that we are indeed the experts in safety, we gladly answer all their questions. In doing so, we spend our time and efforts creating a workforce that becomes too lazy to think or work out the resolutions. After all, why think, when someone else will do it for you? If someone else is always willing to give the answer, why waste your time. Plus, if it’s not your answer, you’re no longer

responsible for the results. In the bizarro world, the safety professional has all the right questions, instead of the right answers. We discuss the conditions and walk the individual through the problem solving process. We teach them how to address issues and confirm that they are the experts in their work activity. As such, by asking more questions, we facilitate the transition from safety professionals being the experts to safety professionals becoming a valuable resource for open discussion of ideas.

Recently, we created a task team to address the question of how to get more involvement and accountability by our field personnel. The task group came up with an inspection process and form that our field people use to document safe and unsafe conditions. This information is reviewed by the superintendent and discussed during each morning huddle session. If there are a lot of similar conditions (safe or unsafe), it becomes the topic for the following week's safety meeting. While only in use for about three months, it has provided a standard for establishing safe conditions and work practices and helped to eliminate safety concerns and issues that occur during the project. While "management" could have created this process, the buy-in among the field workers was greater when the process was created by their own peers.

Spoken vs. Picture

Just as everyone's perception of a situation is different (just ask a police officer about witness statements), everyone's understanding of words aren't always the same. In this fast-paced technological world of texting and tweeting, clarity isn't always the number one priority--speed is. In the fast-paced world of construction productivity, we rush through coordination meetings and activity work plans. We assume that since the plan is written in English, that everyone understands. Maybe we do, maybe we don't, but one thing is sure: we probably all understand it just a little bit differently. Let's say the building calls for blue paint. There are as many different shades of blue as there are colleges and universities. So how do we confirm the accuracy of the information? By "painting" a picture, regardless if words or drawings, or both, are used. The belief in the bizarro world is that if we all clearly "see" the same picture, we will all end up with the same product or outcome. Pictures define the actions necessary to make things work . . . correctly.

When training employees in safety, we participate in the planning of upcoming activities for their assigned project. After a while, they participate in the meeting without my presence. They do express some uncertainty, but are willing try to do their best. I advised them that they will have to explain the activity planning and procedures to me after the meeting. During our initial discussions after the meeting, I will ask them questions to make sure I understand the procedures. Knowing there will be a different level of understanding, I ask them to draw me a picture of the logistics and process. If they are unable to do so, I send them back for a follow-up meeting until they understand the procedures well enough to draw me the picture. When they are able to do that, they now have the ability to safety oversee the activity procedures. The lesson – because of the nature of construction and the use construction drawings, we have found that our workers have an innate understanding and relate better to pictures than words.

Right/Wrong vs. Different

Who's not familiar with the saying, "There's the right way and the wrong way?" This has morphed into "there's my way (right) or the highway (wrong)." When speaking in absolutes, it leaves no room for discussion and compromise. This would be appropriate in a black and white world, but unfortunately, the one we operate in comes in various shades of gray. Too often, we

stick to the way that is known and has proven successful in the past. Unfortunately, the past eventually becomes obsolete. And in this time of rapid-fire technological advances, what is cutting edge today could become obsolete tomorrow. While we do not want to forget the lessons of the past, we should not dwell in it either. The bizarro approach is based on the premise that there is no right or wrong, only different. In other words, we no longer live in a world of “one-size-fits-all.” It’s more a matter of what works, and what works differently. As long as we all arrive at the desired outcome, does it really matter? Picture this, if we are all trying to get from Location A to Location B, will we all take the same route? Probably not. But if we all know what time we need to be there, who cares what route we took, as long as we all arrive on time?

Some years ago, there was a project involving the construction of a two-story house. The question arose of how to establish fall protection for work on the second floor. In the past, anchor points were established prior to any framing of the external walls. Guard rails were considered infeasible as they would have to be removed prior to erecting the framing studs. Lanyard attached to retractables and rope grabs created many tripping conditions, especially with the number of employees working in the area. The question was asked, could we prefabricate the exterior frame studs and then lift them into place? There would only be 2 or 3 employees on the open deck to receive and secure the prefabricated piece and therefore eliminate the tripping hazards. Additionally, once the exterior frames were in place, they served as the guardrails. It worked perfectly in this situation. In this situation, a different approach resulted in better production and quality. Just as there is more than one way to skin a cat, there is more than one way to put up exterior wall framing.

Job Security vs. Expendability

In these challenging and unsettled economic times, or any time for that matter, it is human nature to want security. After all, security is one of the needs for survivability. Some of us in the safety profession sometimes take job security to an extreme. After all, if we are the experts, and no one else knows as much as I do; they can never get rid of me. This is true! This is also fine and dandy for some people, as long as you enjoy doing the same thing forever and ever. By this definition, to become secure in our position means that no one else can do that specific job. Unfortunately, that may mean that your organization cannot afford to promote you and that you have dead-ended yourself. It also means that you may never get the opportunity to use the other talents, skills and experiences that you have acquired over the years. Or worse yet, the other responsibilities are just added to your already overloaded work responsibilities. In contrast, bizzaros look for every opportunity to make ourselves expendable, in effect, working ourselves out of a job. In effect, we work ourselves out of the job we are currently in. In turn, this allows us to contribute in a variety of different and more challenging ways. Besides, what would you like your legacy to be? That you were the best at your job and no one else can replace you, or that your disciples have now populated the world (or at least spread through the organization)?

When I first joined Pankow Construction, there was a renewed focus on how to put the responsibility of safety back to the project staff instead of the safety manager overseeing the work activity. Unfortunately, unless your company has a safety person for every project, there is no way to cover all projects simultaneously. There was a lot of resistance at first. However, delaying activities because I was not available did not always sit well with the “Type A” personalities (which superintendents tend to be). Instead, we took the approach that it’s just another decision they have to make as part of their daily lives, very similar to the route they choose to drive every day. It came down to having the team gain confidence in their ability to make the best decision they could based on the facts known at that time. While not every decision worked perfectly, we

concentrated on the decision-making process, specifically evaluating the condition, instead of purely the end result. As workers encounter success, they also learn how to make effective decisions, plan their work, and revise their established procedures as necessary. As a result, it gave the projects teams more flexibility while getting them to accept accountability, without waiting for the safety guy to tell them what to do and how to do it. This also resulted in the flexibility to choose which critical activities I could focus my time and efforts on. Plus, I can now take vacations uninterrupted by phone calls and emails.

Managers vs. Leaders

Every organization needs effective managers. These individuals are great at managing resources (or the lack thereof). They are aware of the bottom line, yet still manage to get the work done. Their greatest strength, the managing of resources, can sometimes become their greatest pitfall. Managing resources is one thing, but when we fall into the trap of treating our people as impersonal resources, we fail to give consideration to our organization's greatest asset, our people. Never forget that an organization is only as good as its people. We've all hired the best person available for the job (have you ever heard of anyone choosing to hire the least qualified applicant?), so why not allow them to become a valuable contributor to the success of your organization? The bizarre approach is to lead and inspire our employees to greatness. Our responsibility is to support them and help them become successful in their efforts. All leaders have one thing in common; they all have followers (at least one, but the more the merrier). I have found that in generations before us, people were loyal to companies. In today's fast-paced, short-attention-span world, people are more likely to be loyal to those that they work with. Which provides better results, demanding that people work harder, or inspiring people to be the best they can be?

One of the hardest transitions I ever had to make was the ability to give subordinates room to grow. As a technician and manager, I preferred to take responsibility for things I had direct control over and not leave it to chance or others. This actually resulted in my having to perform work for multiple people instead of just focusing on my own responsibilities. It also prevented my team from growing on the job. After years of operating in this mode, while I gained the reputation for being an excellent manager, "burn-out" always seem to be around the next corner. Then the epiphany hit me. Based on my past experience, I had nothing to prove to anyone, including myself. Instead, a more effective approach was to help others learn, grow, experience success, and gain confidence in themselves and their abilities. Now, my perspective is I can help others gain and use the knowledge I've learned over the years. In return, their efforts take them farther than I could ever teach them and, they end up teaching me new things every day. By supporting the efforts of others, they have greatly contributed to my ongoing education.

Ownership vs. Lease

Let's cut to the chase here, in the bizarre world, I do not own my organization's safety effort. I am privileged that the workforce has allowed me to lease participation time in their safety actions and efforts. I am not responsible for any of the safety successes or recognition the workforce has earned. The workforce graciously allowed me to go along for the ride, enjoying the thrills of success and discovery. As a result, when it is time for me to leave, the success the workforce has experienced has an opportunity to continue. They know they are successful because they are smart, and will continue on their journey to excellence and success.

Safety in the Bizzaro World

What seems isn't always what is. The why not may be more valuable than the why. Tradition and convention may be the safe and proven method, but being different leads to creativity and innovation. Safety professionals asking questions instead of being the experts providing answers? Speaking in pictures instead of words? Living in a world of different instead of right and wrong? Sacrificing job security at the risk of becoming expendable? Leaders supporting instead of leading? And finally, safety leadership leasing involvement time from the workforce instead of owning the safety effort? What is this world coming to? Welcome to safety in my world.

Welcome to Safety in the Bizarro World!