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Creating a Culture Where Employees Own Safety

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Introduction

Safety is not something management does *to* or *for* employees. Management commitment to safety is necessary, but true safety excellence requires engagement from personnel throughout the organization, especially the hourly employees. Such engagement in safety benefits the employees as well as the organization. In fact, studies recognize that by focusing organizational effort to cultivate a culture of involvement and participation, zero injuries is achievable. However, safety must become a cooperative process where everyone participates to make the workplace safer. Every worker has something meaningful to contribute, and people will contribute if the climate is right.

Leadership Support

The day-to-day activities and behaviors of organizational leaders form the foundation of an organization's safety culture. Managers at all levels of the organization need to exemplify a shared vision of safety excellence and demonstrate the leadership styles and practices needed to drive the desired culture change, including fostering a sense of employee ownership of safety.

The importance of management support and leadership to the overall safety culture cannot be over emphasized. Leaders must believe employee safety is a corporate value, one that should never be compromised. They must consistently demonstrate this value through their own practices, as well as through their formal decisions. When employees believe safety is indeed a shared organizational value, they contribute extra effort to safety improvement initiatives, and

they are less likely to succumb to the natural and imposed pressure to circumvent safe work practices.

To increase the visibility of management support among the hourly employees, organizations should continue to emphasize their traditional initiatives, taking special care to ensure the efforts are communicated and understood by the employees. These may include providing quick follow-up and/or feedback to environmental hazards identified, redesigning ineffective safety training courses, and giving employees opportunities to express their safety concerns. Of course, any time employee input is sought, it is essential to have a process in place for providing prompt feedback and follow-up.

Leaders need to help employees feel they are doing worthwhile work and are therefore important. Too often, negative feedback can belittle one's sense of importance, and that's disastrous for voluntary participation. That's why it's critical to emphasize a person's positive contributions to the work place. When people believe their work is genuinely appreciated, they want to improve and do their best. They become self-motivated.

There's probably no faster way to decrease employee involvement than to apply negative consequences in an attempt to correct behaviors such as giving an individual an embarrassing reprimand for working at-risk or for not following a designated safety procedure. Punishment is detrimental to long-term participation and can turn individuals and an entire work culture against those doing the punishing. Use punishment as a last resort – only after you've tried the many other more positive and effective techniques.

Managers themselves may inadvertently contradict their true support for safety through their interpersonal interactions with employees. For example, it's common for managers to overlook and fail to correct at-risk work practices they observe. While it may be easier to disregard "small" infractions, the unspoken message sent is that the at-risk behavior is acceptable, and in fact, short-cuts in general are tolerable, especially when they benefit production. Managers need to consider the variety of ways their own behavior can negatively influence others' perceptions of their support for safety and avoid these all-too-common mistakes.

Because hourly employees are often far removed from the day-to-day decisions being made by management, their awareness of management's consideration of safety issues may be limited. Without effective communications systems in place, many management decisions and actions supporting safety are never known or realized by employees. Conversely, the rationale for decisions which may not appear to take safety into account is not understood. An extra effort should be made to "publicize" safety-related initiatives throughout the workforce. The employees need to be made aware of the improvement efforts being championed, and the rationale behind decisions made, in order for them to fully realize management's commitment to improving safety.

When safety is <u>not</u> held as a value in the organization, proactive safety initiatives among hourly workers are rare. In these organizations, safety is not considered in the broader organizational decisions. Safety only gets addressed when there is an incident, such as an OSHA recordable, a union grievance, or a public revelation. Because the values of an organization drive the decisions leaders make to direct the actions of a company, employee involvement or engagement in safety requires that safety is among the corporate values. When safety is a corporate value, leaders

integrate safety into all strategic and tactical decisions. Every decision can have an impact on safety. Thus safety should be considered in every corporate decision that impacts employees.

We also have to consider that some leaders simply do not know how to make safety a value. They may not have experienced this perspective in their careers or professional background. The major hurdle to making safety a corporate value is the additional time it will take to build and manage strong safety systems and integrate these in all other management processes.

System-Based

To encourage employee engagement in safety, the safety infrastructure must invite employees to become actively engaged. Safety systems and processes must be structured with opportunities for employee involvement and designed to facilitate a sense of ownership and personal control.

A Total Safety Culture can only be achieved with a systems approach, including balanced attention to all aspects of the corporate culture (Exhibit 1). Three basic domains, for example, need attention when designing and evaluating safety processes and when analyzing contributing factors of close calls and injuries:

1. Environment factors (such as equipment, tools, machines, housekeeping, engineering, management systems);
2. Person factors (employees' knowledge, skills, abilities, intelligence, motives, personality);
3. Behavior factors (employees complying, recognizing, communicating, actively caring).

Two of these categories involve human factors. Each of these generally receives less attention than the environment, largely because it is more difficult to obtain visible consequences of efforts to change the human factors. For example, changes in an environmental factor affect behaviors and attitudes. And behavior change usually results in some change in the environment.

When people choose to change their behavior, they adjust their attitudes and beliefs to be consistent with their actions. This change in attitude can influence more behavior change and then more attitude change – a spiraling, reciprocal interdependency between our outward actions and our inward feelings. This is how small changes in behavior and attitude can eventually lead to personal commitment and total involvement. Some human factors programs focus on behavior-based safety management, whereas others focus on attitudes (as in a person-based approach). A Total Safety Culture requires integrating both behavior-based and person-based approaches to understand and influence the human element of a corporate culture. This is called People-Based Safety.

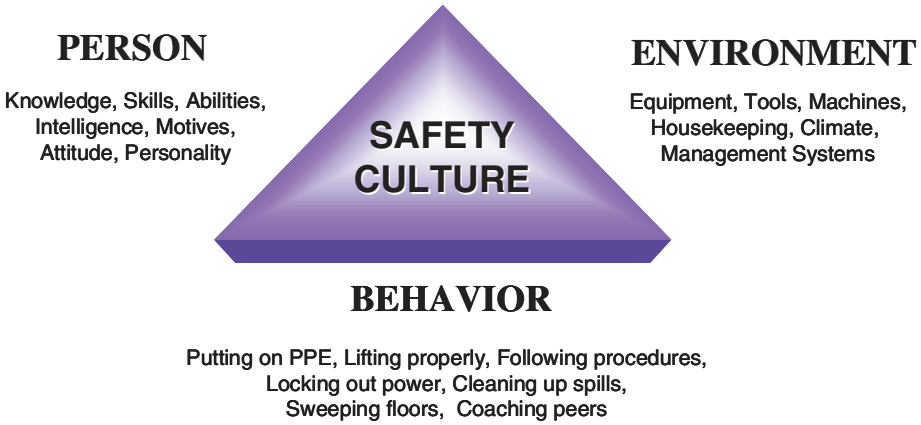


Exhibit 1. A Total Safety Culture requires continual attention to three factors. (Adapted from Geller, 1996)

The central themes of a Total Safety Culture through People-Based Safety (e.g., employee involvement, focus on the process of achieving safety, emphasis on behavior as *part* of the safety system) can serve as a standard or benchmark against which to measure and modify an organization's safety management systems. These principles of psychology are applicable for creating safety management systems which motivate and support safe work practices. For example, in many organizations rewards or recognition for safety, targets reactive outcomes (i.e., injury rates) and the avoidance of failure. If employee incentive programs and/or supervisor performance evaluations are based primarily on injury rates, it is unreasonable to expect those employees to embrace an open injury-reporting system or to feel comfortable being observed when a risky behavior is possible.

Blaming a particular individual or group of individuals for an "accident" is not consistent with a proactive systems approach to safety. Instead, an injury or close call provides an opportunity to consider facts from all aspects of the system that could have contributed to the incident. Not only are there environment, person, and behavior factors explored as potential contributors, but numerous historical factors are also considered. How common, for example, was the at-risk behavior? How many observed the at-risk behavior without intervening? And what aspects of operations and the management system supported that at-risk behavior.

For employees to willingly participate in incident reporting and analysis, a systems approach is necessary which supports a fact-finding perspective, a proactive stance, and an appreciation of continuous improvement. People need to talk openly about various environmental, behavioral, and personal factors, but this won't happen if the goal of an incident analysis (often called an "accident investigation") is to find a single reason (or "root cause") for the "failure."

Employees also need to be involved in the actual correction phase of the process. People will contribute more if they have a say in the outcome. Of course, management needs to approve and support the corrections recommended by the workforce. When you use their critical expertise, you'll motivate more ownership and involvement in the entire process.

We can foster individuals' sense of personal responsibility for safety by providing the systems to allow additional opportunities to improve safety and then providing recognition to support these efforts. In a Total Safety Culture, employees realize these opportunities take many forms. Reporting a near miss, correcting a hazard, reporting injuries, observing peers and giving feedback all offer employees a chance to help improve safety performance.

Holding people accountable for safety means helping them set reasonable safety goals for themselves, then providing them with the tools to achieve those goals. As employees begin to see improvements resulting from their efforts, they continue to develop additional commitment to safety and subsequent ownership over the safety process. Organizations serious about changing their safety culture should critically analyze each system to be certain it is aligned with Total Safety Culture principles.

Systems' thinking is consistent with the scholarship of such continuous-improvement gurus as Covey (1989), Deming (1986), and Senge (1990). It can increase the quantity and improve the quality of people's involvement in all aspects of occupational safety – from analyzing incidents to implementing corrective action plans. Such thinking helps people realize their importance in solving problems without fear of being blamed as a "root cause." It advances understanding of factors outside and inside people that influence participation, and provides direction for benefiting self-persuasion and self-accountability (Geller, 2008).

Finally, it should be acknowledged that many hourly employees are simply not in the position to have the systems perspective necessary to understand and appreciate those decisions which do not appear to support safety. Though more effective communication and sound management practices will help, these individuals may never fully appreciate the degree of support their management has for safety.

Behavior-Based

It's important to realize that individual behavior is governed by the consequences that follow it. To sustain employee involvement in safety activities, employees must feel the effort is worthwhile, recognized and appreciated. Formal and informal efforts must be made to support active engagement in safety improvement efforts.

The ABC Model (Exhibit 2) is a basic tenet of understanding the behavior-based and people-based approach to safety. "A" stands for "activator" which may be a condition or event that "directs" the "behavior" (B). "C" stands for "consequence" which is something that results from our behavior and "motivates" us. We do what we do either to enjoy a positive consequence or to avoid a negative consequence. We stop doing what we're doing when our behavior results in immediate negative consequences or the removal of positive consequences. The most powerful consequences are certain, soon, and significant.

However, in a culture promoting employee involvement, positive consequences are preferred because of how negative consequences make people feel. Think about how a reward, personal recognition, or a group celebration makes you feel compared to a reprimand or criticism? Both consequences are significant with regard to behavioral impact. The difference is in the

accompanying attitude or feeling state. When feelings or attitudes are considered, people-based safety is implicated.

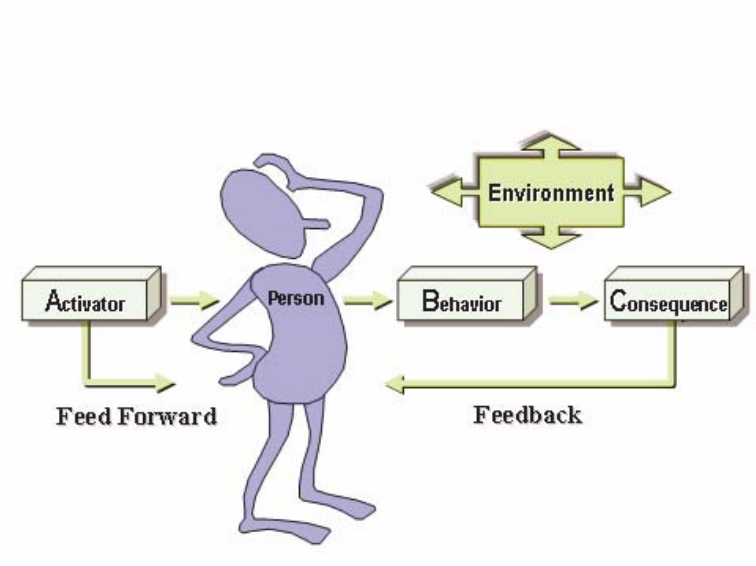


Exhibit 2. Activators and consequences are filtered through the person. (Adapted from Geller, 2005)

Everyone realizes that injuries will be reduced substantially if people are motivated to work more safely over the long term. However, asking people to actively care for their health and safety means they give up a very powerful immediate positive consequence--the ease, speed, or comfort that often comes from taking risks. In return for this extra effort, safety leaders promise a bigger reward of no personal injury and lessen the chances of a co-worker getting hurt. Unfortunately, this delayed reward might not seem credible because who knows when or if the payoff might occur?

Most employees don't expect to get hurt on the job and many don't see how their behavior can put others at risk. Our past experience tells us we can do the risky behavior and get away with it. So employees need to develop an internal script (or belief system) to keep them doing the desirable behaviors or keeping the faith. Thus safety leaders need to understand how positive recognition not only increases the frequency of the behavior it follows, it also increases the likelihood other safe behaviors will occur because a positive attitude toward safety is developed. So, recognizing people's involvement in safety will facilitate more learning and positive motivation than criticizing people's risky behaviors and/or lack of involvement in safety.

Organizations need to use behavior-based principles appropriately to build internal feeling states like self-efficacy, personal control, optimism, self-esteem, and belonging which relates to people-based safety. To get employee involvement, organizations must understand the interdependency between behavior-based and person-based approaches to behavior management.

People-Based

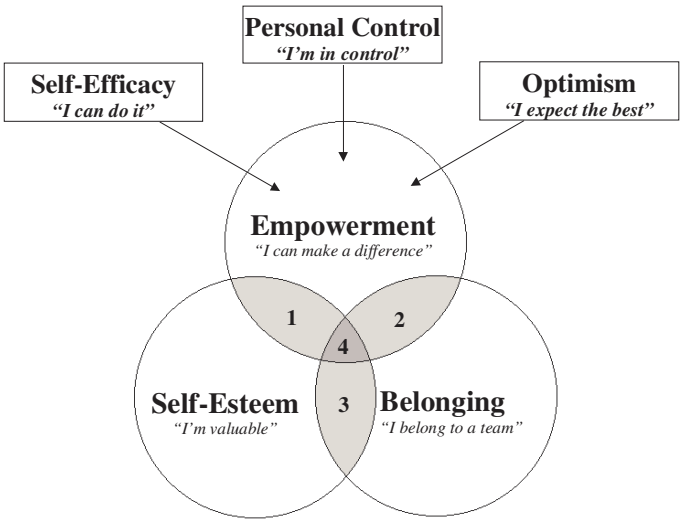
As stated previously, individual behavior is governed by the consequences that follow it, and one of the most influential consequences is peer acceptance and support. Therefore, unless the organizational culture promotes and encourages an Actively Caring environment, even well-intentioned, caring individuals may pass up opportunities to intervene on behalf of another's safety.

For improved safety performance, an organization's safety culture must promote a sense of shared responsibility for safety through genuine empowerment. When people feel as though they have influence, are important, and are part of something larger (i.e., they are *truly* empowered), and they are more likely to put forth the "discretionary effort" needed for the success of any safety improvement initiative. Research indicates people are more likely to help others (or emit discretionary behavior) when they have relatively high levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, optimism, and a sense of belonging (Exhibit 3). These factors reflect how we feel about ourselves, our peers, and our organizations, and influence how likely we are to go beyond the call of duty for the safety of others.

Self-Esteem reflects how valued and appreciated people feel. If we don't feel good about ourselves, we are unlikely to care about helping others. Self-Esteem is feeling "I am valuable." To increase self-esteem, create heroes in every role and help all people feel important. It's also important to eliminate fear from the workplace and provide sincere and personal praise for employee involvement.

Self-efficacy reflects one's confidence in completing a task successfully, especially in the face of obstacles. This is the perception of competence. To increase this state, organizations provide effective and comprehensive training as well as reward successful performance. Recognizing safety leaders (informally and formally) also increases self-efficacy or the feeling, "I can do it."

Personal control reflects the belief that we can influence or control our own lives. When we feel in control, we feel responsible for and able to influence what goes on around us. Personal control explains the difference between having responsibility and feeling responsible. In other words, it means feeling, "I am in control." To increase personal control, organizations need to create opportunities for employees to manage safety efforts and initiatives. Using advice from employees to make changes for safety and giving behavior-based feedback to increase competence will also increase personal control.



1. I can make valuable differences.
2. We can make a difference.
3. I'm a valuable team member.
4. We can make valuable differences.

Exhibit 3. Certain person states influence a person's willingness to actively care for the safety and health of others. (Adapted from Geller, 1996)

Optimism is the expectation that good things will happen in the future. Optimistic people believe their efforts will positively influence outcomes. Optimists say "I expect the best." To increase optimism, provide expectations rather than mandates and always respond quickly and effectively to people's concerns. Providing surprise rewards for exceptional performance will also increase optimism.

Belonging reflects our desire to be liked and accepted by others. It is a feeling of being connected to the people we work with, who make up our team. There is a lot of power in feeling "I belong to a team." When we feel connected with those around us, we're more likely to go out of our way on behalf of their safety. To increase belonging, set team goals and provide team-building exercises. Give group recognition and provide group celebrations for goal attainment or team success.

Because these factors change from situation to situation, we call them states not traits. States can be built and nurtured in others to increase the likelihood they will actively care. That is, they fluctuate over time, largely as a result of our interactions with others and the organizational environment, rather than being permanent characteristics of our personalities. To help others become more involved and actively care for safety, we must work to increase each of these five factors in ourselves and in those around us. Practices and policies within an organization can serve to either build or destroy these states within its members.

Actively Caring requires a series of decisions. First, we must be able to recognize hazards or risky behavior and decide it is worth some effort to improve. Next, we must recognize we have

the ability to make a difference. Then, several options may be available on how to intervene and we must decide how best to help.

However, recognizing the need and knowing what should be done is not enough. Many people still do not take action even after knowing what they should do. There are many obstacles or barriers to Actively Caring. Some of us question whether the hazard is severe enough to warrant action, we may question our ability to determine the most appropriate intervention, or we may fear the person at-risk will not appreciate our feedback and see it as an unwelcome intrusion. Therefore, it takes a feeling of personal responsibility and real courage to Actively Care, especially when the situation is not extremely risky or if the most appropriate intervention is not clear. Recognizing the courage it takes and showing appreciation when it occurs will ultimately increase the level of Actively Caring throughout the organization.

Summary

Leaders contribute to a culture of safety excellence foremost by demonstrating that safety is a value to themselves and to the company. Leaders then assure the right conditions and systems are in place to both allow employees to perform their jobs safely and also to participate in safety improvement initiatives.

Employees contribute to a culture of safety excellence by being actively engaged in the safety improvement process. They can only do this if the culture allows them to feel positive about themselves, their coworkers, and their organization. They believe they can make a difference and are willing to go beyond their normal job to make a difference. Finally employees then behave in ways that enhance the safety of themselves and others. This includes behaving safely on the job and also actively influencing the behavior of their peers and supervisors through Actively Caring.

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