

NEW EMPLOYEES & SAFETY CULTURE

A Social Cognitive Theory Perspective

By Kevin O'Kelley

A QUICK INTERNET SEARCH FOR "NEW WORKPLACE" turns up articles with titles such as, "How to Fit Into a New Job and Adapt to Company Culture," "Dos and Don'ts for Adjusting to Your New Job" and "Workplace Culture Shock: Adjusting to a New Company Culture." There are no articles titled, "How to Change Your New Company's Culture to Fit *Your* Desires," or "Why Should *You* Change? Make Your New Workplace Change, Instead!" It is axiomatic that the new employee is expected to conform to the company, rather than the other way around. In fact, the typical job interview process revolves around explaining the company's mission and culture to the applicant, then determining whether the applicant is a good fit for that culture.

Starting a new job is often extremely stressful. Sapolsky (2005) writes that the manner in which strangers interact is influenced by hardwired physiological adaptations shaped by human evolution. For the first couple of hundred-thousand years of human existence, we all lived in small bands and we remain comfortable dealing only with those we have known our entire lives. Seeing a stranger invokes physiological changes that trigger alarm. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that a cohesive and stable group of individuals will view nonmembers as inferior in some dimensions. The group has a social identity while the individual does not. This motivates the nonmember to strive to become a member of the group.

Consider the example of a tribe of ice-age hunter-gatherers meeting a stranger. They must immediately decide whether

the newcomer is a threat, either to themselves, their territory or their possessions, then take instant action. Knowing this, the outnumbered and solitary human will typically behave submissively, particularly when on another's home turf. If the newcomer wants to be welcomed, he would need to immediately convince the group that he is not a threat and wants to join their group. This might mean, for example, handing over his weapons, offering to share possessions or signifying kinship in some way. A longer stay (e.g., over the winter) would entail the stranger learning and adopting multiple social norms, such as respecting group hierarchy (pecking order), food- and work-sharing habits, and mating customs. Every new employee is like that lone hunter-gatherer, in a tight-knit clan of strangers, hoping to stay for the winter.

Psychologists, anthropologists, human resources experts and social scientists from various fields of study have examined

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- For many workers, changing jobs and learning new safety cultures is the new normal. Employees will quickly adopt the safety culture of a new employer.
- Social cognitive theory provides a framework for understanding how employees learn to behave at their new place of employment. It also suggests the mechanisms required to improve an existing safety culture.
- Elements that impact learning and which should therefore be deliberately addressed in any safety culture improvement program include observational learning, modeling, agency and outcome expectations.



cultural assimilation, and many theories and models exist to describe the process. In the narrow case here of an employee joining a new workforce and “learning the ropes,” the social cognitive theory developed by Bandura (1977; 1986; 1989; 2001) offers the best model for understanding the process.

Earlier theories of learning relied heavily on models developed by behaviorist scientists. The behaviorist doctrine espoused by B.F. Skinner and others was that of the conditioned response. A broad summary of operant conditioning theory is beyond the scope of this article, but it boils down to the concept that an act that is rewarded tends to be repeated and an act that is not rewarded (or is punished) tends to die out. A key component of operant conditioning learning theory is that “learning is a function of change in behavior” and these changes are the result of an individual’s response to events (Modgil & Modgil, 1987). According to Skinner, without a change in behavior, no learning has really occurred. This stimulus-response model, while useful for understanding some human and animal behavior, is inadequate in explaining the broad range of human learning and development. Bandura recognized that a human does not need to suffer the consequences (or reap the rewards) of an action him/herself to learn the behavior. We can also observe the consequences for a different human and learn in that manner.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory was the first break from the behaviorist theories of human learning that dominated early 20th century psychology research. In a seminal work on the subject, Miller and Dollard (1941) proposed that if humans were motivated to perform a certain behavior, they would observe others doing it and then imitate them. They termed this social learning theory. Humans do not learn behavior simply by being told how to behave or conditioned how to behave, but more typically by observing the actions of others and the consequences of those actions. If I see someone touch a hot stove, then shriek and stick his finger in his mouth, I do not need to touch the stove myself. A great deal of human learning occurs this way, through social interaction. Miller and Dollard conclude that there are four factors that contribute to observational learning: drives, cues, responses and rewards. In other words, if Suzie is cued by seeing that Johnny gets a slice of pie as a reward for eating all the lima beans on his plate, then Suzie (if she likes pie) will have the drive to imitate that behavior, knows the appropriate action and will imitate Johnny in hopes of the same reward.

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura (1989) expands on this concept by realizing that not only is Suzie imitating Johnny’s behavior, she is also thinking about imitating that behavior before doing so. Thus, social learning theory morphs to social cognitive theory. Bandura posits that the important learning occurs before action is taken. Suzie decided that she liked pie more than she disliked lima beans. She then decided to eat the beans. Alternatively, Suzie could have learned the lesson (eating beans equals getting pie) and decided not to change her behavior. The lesson is learned whether or not behavior changes. If Johnny gets pie for eating his beans tonight, Suzie can do the same, or not, whichever she chooses. Further, Suzie may predict that if she eats all her vegetables tomorrow night, she will also get pie then.

A new employee is highly motivated to be accepted by his/her peers and colleagues. S/he will be a keen observer of the ac-

tions of others, and will both consciously and unconsciously conform his/her behavior to theirs. If the crew eats lunch at noon, so will s/he. If they dress in business casual rather than blue jeans, so will s/he. This is not to suggest that a person will change his/her character, but will change actions, behavior. When it comes to safety issues, s/he will tend to adopt those practices s/he sees others at the new workplace following. S/he will likely not wear a hard hat if no one else does.

Safety in the workplace provides an excellent example of the shortcoming of the operant conditioning model of human learning. There is sometimes an immediate reinforcer to an unsafe act. If you, a newly trained welder, touch hot metal with your bare hands, you get burned right away and you learn not to do that again. Operant conditioning explains that particular behavioral modification quite nicely. However, the commission of a safe act usually does not result in immediate reinforcement. If you wear gloves when handling all metal, you do not get unhurt. There is no reinforcer for that behavior. So how do you decide whether to wear your leather gloves? You make a cognitive decision, and do it based on what you see of the behavior of others and observing the consequences of those behaviors. In other words, you adopt the safety culture of your environment.

Triadic Reciprocal Causation

Bandura (1986) postulates that “Learning occurs in a social context, with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of the person, environment, and behavior.” As depicted in Figure 1, the influences go both ways between the three elements of what Bandura refers to as triadic reciprocal causation.

The person-behavior reciprocal causation interaction reflects the obvious fact that a person’s nature affects his/her behavior. But the reciprocal is also true: a person’s actions will influence his/her thoughts and reactions. The person-environment interaction reciprocity illustrates the fact that the social environment in which a person exists will affect his/her nature and activate emotional and cognitive responses through modeling and social persuasion, and the person’s human nature will in turn have some impact on his/her social environment, perhaps due to the person’s size, race, intelligence, social status or aggressiveness. The third leg of the triad, the behavior-environment segment, represents the fact that behavior affects the environment and is, in turn, altered by the very conditions it creates.

Every new employee is on that same merry-go-round. His/her personality, life experiences and prior work environment all will influence the person’s behavior at a new workplace. It goes without saying that the person’s actions will have an impact on the environment in which s/he works. But the work environment also affects him/her. Was the person’s action approved of or not? Was s/he successful in meeting objectives? What feedback did s/he receive? Do coworkers do it the same way? What did s/he learn about the work s/he just did? Will s/he do the same thing tomorrow or do something differently?

Observational Learning

We learn “normal” behavior at a workplace through observation of others. Observational learning can take many forms, including the acquisition of new manual skills, the adoption of new judgment standards and even new cognitive capabilities. While observational learning (sometimes called vicarious learning) may be inherent in the human animal, certain fundamental attributes must exist for it to occur. According to Ban-

dura (1986), in the absence of any one of these four elements, learning will not take place:

1) Attention. The new employee's attention must be focused on the behavior s/he is expected to learn. In many job environments, the new person is mentored by a more experienced employee and is personally shown tasks in a one-on-one setting. This is an ideal method of ensuring single-minded focus on skill acquisition.

2) Retention. Obviously, the new employee must retain the information about how a task is performed. Depending on the complexity of the assignment, this may take multiple repetitions.

3) Reproduction. The employee must be able to reproduce the action. A new forklift driver will not be able to immediately reproduce the actions of a seasoned operator. And, equally obviously, a person cannot learn to perform a task if the person is physically incapable of it.

4) Motivation. Obviously, the employee must be motivated to learn the job. If an employee gives you 2 weeks' notice of their intent to quit, that is not a good time to begin training the person on a new task. Alternatively, offering a new employee an increase in pay once a certain task has been mastered will motivate the person. People are far more likely to duplicate modeled behavior if it results in valued outcomes.

Modeling

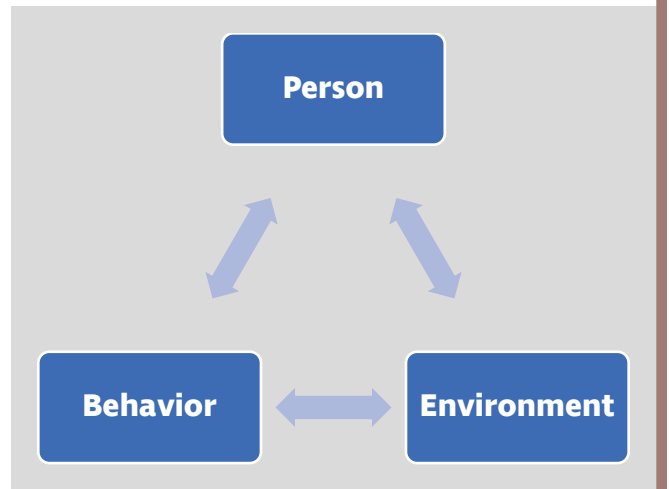
In a series of well-known experiments conducted in the 1960s, Bandura exposed children to Bobo, a life-size inflatable doll. If a child saw a person hitting and punching the doll and was then left alone with it, the child was far more likely to act aggressively toward the doll than were children who had not seen such behavior. No verbal instructions were given, no reward was offered. The mere observation of modeled behavior was sufficient to influence the children's actions. Continuing research on the subject of modeling suggests that this replication of observed behavior is facilitated by greater commonality between the model and the learner. That is, the more closely the subject (the new employee in our case) identifies with the model (e.g., age, sex, ethnicity), the more likely the observed behavior will be emulated.

Who will the new employee model his/her behavior after? If left to chance, it might be the loudest or most aggressive employee, the most attractive or the one the employee knows from a previous job. It is vital that new employees not be tossed into the work pool to sink or swim, choosing their model randomly. If an organization wishes to develop a new employee in a certain direction, the role model assigned to orient him/her must be deliberately chosen, not left to chance. A mentor who knows the ropes and personifies the company's desired culture is vital. "As the twig is bent, so grows the tree," and you only have one chance to bend the twig of a new employee in the direction you want the person to grow.

Agency

Human beings at work are not rats in a Skinner Box, hapless victims of operant conditioning. We have agency, which Bandura (1989) defines as "the capacity to exercise control over one's own thought processes, motivation and action." While we have reflexes (e.g., we pull our hand quickly away from a hot stove), we are, for the most part, free agents with the ability to determine our actions ourselves. We can decide to behave one way or another, regardless of the behaviors we have seen modeled, the rules we are expected to follow and cultural

FIGURE 1
TRIADIC RECIPROCAL CAUSATION



norms. We are even free to act against our own best interests. Individuals are "self-developing, self-regulating, self-reflecting and proactive" (Bandura, 1986). We are not bound to duplicate the actions we have been taught to reproduce. It is a mistake to assume that a new employee will mindlessly copy the actions of his/her model.

The list of reasons we deviate from established procedures is endless: Self-interest, fatigue, forgetfulness, complacency. *Errare humanum est* (to err is human). All of us have made mistakes. It seems to be a common learning modality. Yet, it is possible to reduce the opportunity for some mistakes by employing effective modeling to drive the new employee's agency in the right direction.

Outcome Expectancies

People will expect a certain outcome as the result of a certain action, based on observation of the modeled behavior and its consequences. Bandura (1986) refers to this as vicarious reinforcement ("I saw Johnny eat his lima beans, then I saw him get a slice of pie"). The inherent problem with safety and outcome expectancy is that serious workplace incidents are relatively infrequent. An unsafe act usually does not result in an immediate adverse consequence. Often, a secondary safety measure will prevent an incident. Or, possibly, an adverse consequence may be delayed with no evident relationship between action and consequence.

Safety rules (and OSHA regulations) tend to focus on preventing the infrequent but serious incidents or mitigating their consequences. This fact often results in a safety culture that ignores infrequently realized hazards for the sake of efficiency. Consider the following example. In the U.S., all tractors manufactured since 1976 (with some exceptions) are equipped with rollover protection systems (ROPS). The use of a ROPS virtually eliminates fatalities from tractor rollover incidents (Reynolds & Groves, 2000). Yet, tractor owners and operators are reluctant to use ROPS and only infrequently install them on older model tractors. Why? In many agricultural settings, a safety culture exists that militates against ROPS usage. After all, tractor rollovers are extremely rare. Most people will never roll a tractor in their lives. Therefore, virtually all labor expended to solve a rarely encountered problem

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is wasted labor and farmers have no time to waste (Myers, 2009). A new employee on a farm where the ROPS is never used will be unlikely to buck the trend and employ it.

These aspects of social cognitive theory (i.e., social conformity, reciprocal causation, observational learning, modeling, agency, outcome expectancies) come into play with every new employee. S/he is virtually helpless before the onslaught of pressures to adopt existing workplace cultural norms, including those of safety. Hiring a person based on his/her past record of safety at a previous employer is not a good indicator of how that employee will act in a new workplace. A much better predictor of the safety performance of a new employee is the safety performance of existing employees.

Conclusion

It is of little use to hand a new employee a safety handbook, train the person on the rules, then turn him/her loose and expect that the employee has learned and will now follow those written rules. This will not happen, nor will the person learn much during safety meetings. Social cognitive theory explains that new employees will duplicate behaviors they see performed by others that are followed by a reward. The reward may be the mere reduction in energy expended to accomplish a task, or it might be an "attabooy" for getting a job done quickly. Hiring a new employee with a strong safety record is not enough. New employees will have less impact on the workplace than the workplace has on them. That is fine if we understand how humans learn and know what we want to teach them. Select employees who retain the flexibility to adapt and learn, then immerse them in a social environment that exhibits the safety culture you want.

If a company desires to improve the overall safety culture of the workplace, it is critical that they understand three things: people are social learners; safety culture is a social structure; and cultural change will take time and effort. Fortunately, social cognitive theory provides a sound methodology to incrementally change a workplace safety culture.

- Observational learning. Do not rely on written policies and procedures or safety meetings to train a new employee on safety practices. These must be demonstrated in actual practice. The new employee must be absolutely focused on learning how to perform a task safely, without other distractors. The new employee must personally observe a task being performed a sufficient number of times to retain the knowledge of how to duplicate it properly. The employee must demonstrate the physical capability of performing the task and must be highly motivated to do it correctly. Ideally, this calls for a mentor-mentee relationship.

- Modeling. Even in a homogenous culture a spectrum of safe work behaviors will exist, just based on human differences. Carefully select from whom you want a new employee to learn. Selecting the employee who has just resigned is not a good plan. Instead, use the employee who most closely embodies the safety culture you wish to see emulated. The model (trainer) should be an individual with whom the new employee identifies, that is, a fellow worker rather than a supervisor.

- Outcome expectations. Proper behavior should not be rewarded merely by the absence of an injury, but by immediate rewards (e.g., cash, T-shirts, verbal praise, promotion to next level, pizza). It almost does not matter what form the reward takes, so long as it is immediate and consistent. The outcome of a safely conducted action must be not merely that no adverse

event occurs but that something good actually happens. Supervisors typically lack the resources or the ability to implement such a program. This effort must be supported by management for the long term.

- Agency. An employer and worker must have a mutual understanding that an employee is not a robot. The employee is capable of doing the job right or doing it wrong. Safely working employees are not "just doing their job" and therefore underserving of any reward beyond their paycheck. Praise employees for doing their jobs if they are doing so safely.

New employee onboarding is an important task. The manager's job is not done when a candidate is selected for hire and turned over to a supervisor to be trained. For the first few weeks (even the first day), the new employee must be immersed in the desired safety culture. Be sure to not only include the expectations of the individual's work performance but take the time to show him/her where safety showers and eyewashes are located and do so on the first day. Show him/her the emergency exits, fire alarm and fire extinguishers before showing the person to his/her desk (or lathe).

Changes in safety cultures take time, but they are not impossible. Too often, desired cultural changes are aimed at short-term immediate results, loudly espoused by remote managers and executives, but ignored among the rank and file because supervisors must focus on the immediate job before them. It is the role of management to develop, implement and sustain long-term programs. Improving a safety culture is not impossible, it is just difficult. An understanding that people learn socially by observing the actions (and consequences of those actions) of those around them is essential to planning and implementing a cultural change. Bandura showed us how humans learn: Don't tell them, show them. **PSJ**

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