

A Universal New Year's Resolution: Take Personal Responsibility for Safety

Last January I proposed a New Year's resolution with broad safety implications. Specifically, I suggested adopting a personal rule to "yield the right of way." While this proposition connects logically to driving, I showed how this simple rule could benefit other aspects of daily life, especially interpersonal communication.

This year I'd like to propose an even more generic New Year's resolution. It pertains to almost every aspect of safety, and almost every reader has heard it before – Take personal responsibility for safety! While this is a common safety slogan, many (if not most) of us deny or avoid it at times. Many give lip service to this rule, but don't follow through with action. And often the inconsistency between intention and behavior is not recognized. So people may believe they are personally responsible for safety when they really are not. Let me explain.

An Illustrative Anecdote

A friend recently told me a simple story that exemplifies this proposal for a New Year's resolution and illustrates my point about denial. Returning to her office after a field safety inspection, Joanne noticed a significant amount of packaging litter adjacent to the building's main entrance. Without hesitation, Joanne collected the litter and disposed of it in a trash receptacle located nearby. While entering the office building, she noticed several people had been watching her. One witness asked, "Why did you pick up that litter? We have custodial staff for that job. You could have simply come inside and called them for

service.” Joanne responded, “I could not just walk by and let that mess deface our attractive building.”

The Denial of Personal Responsibility

Joanne’s experience is not only a story of taking personal responsibility, it illustrates a common technique of responsibility *denial*. No one watching Joanne pick up trash ventured outside to help her. They took time to observe but not to participate. Were these individuals irresponsible? Did they view their non-cooperation as evidence of not being personally responsible?

Here’s a key point. These onlookers did not view themselves as irresponsible or even lacking personal responsibility because they had a handy excuse for not helping – “It’s not my job.” This is probably the most common reason for not going beyond the call of duty to help another person. This rationale for “passing the buck” is actually supported by the typical questions we ask when noticing a problem.

Who?, What?, and When?

Questions beginning with *who*, *what*, and *when* avoid personal responsibility by putting accountability somewhere else. Who made that work station so messy? Who disregarded the safety rule? What environmental hazards contributed to his injury? What safety regulation was not followed? When will management allocate sufficient time and financial support for a comprehensive safety coaching process? When will the company install an adequate ventilation system?

I'm not saying these are bad questions to ask – not at all. They represent the kind of questions needed to identify and solve problems related to occupational safety. But they do remove personal responsibility from those asking the questions. They imply the problem is beyond the individual and a solution requires support and action from **other** people.

Why?

Surely we can ask “why”. Doesn't it take five “whys” to arrive at the “root cause” of an incident? My nontraditional answer to this question will take us off track (but see my *ISHN* contribution for July of 2002). Note, however, how some “why?” questions are nonproductive and facilitate denial of personal responsibility.

Why did they miscommunicate? Why don't they provide more support? Why does this always happen to our work team? Why does the supervisor pick on me? Why was I given this assignment? Why me? These “why” questions activate and support victim thinking and contribute to the avoidance of personal responsibility.

What Can I Do?

This is the key personal responsibility question. The simple question – “What can I do?” – reflects the essence of personal responsibility. “What” is linked to “I” and focuses on “doing” something. That's the implicit question Joanne asked when noticing a littered entrance to her office building. She didn't ask “Who did that?” or “Why did they do it?” or “Whose job is it to fix that?”

Instead, Joanne asked “What can I do to help?” and then she did what she could do. She took personal responsibility. That’s my proposal for a “2004 New Year’s Safety Resolution”. Instead of asking questions that give us an excuse to “pass the buck” to someone else sometime later, let’s ask “What can I do right now to help?”

We Can’t Do It All

Joanne’s personal action was sufficient to resolve the litter problem. Similarly, many of our own actively-caring behaviors can provide quick-fix solutions to relatively minor problems. But often we find ourselves in the midst of a safety-related issue that has no quick-fix solution. A long-term investment of financial and interpersonal resources is needed. As a result, it’s easy to deny personal responsibility with the claim, “There’s nothing I can do without more support.”

The big picture may seem overwhelming, and a solution to a certain safety problem may seem remote even with substantial support. But doing nothing at all helps nothing, and could be risky. So break it down. Find something small within your own domain of influence that relates to the problem and take personal responsibility to perform that action.

Start by defining the problem in terms of actions or behaviors, then identify talents or work assignments related to each action, and then select something from this list you can accomplish. Personal responsibility starts with the creation of this list of problem-related activities. Consider persuading someone else to take on a solution-related assignment commensurate with his or her talent and

position in the organization. Then find others to contribute within their domain of personal control.

Thus, personal responsibility can include finding others willing to take personal responsibility. Then the combination of individual effort can lead to synergistic results. The benefits of solving an overwhelming whole problem are greater than the sum of the parts contributed by individuals. And it all started with one person setting an example for personal responsibility.

In Conclusion

My first *ISHN* contribution in 2004 proposes a generic New Year's resolution we've all heard before – Take personal responsibility for safety! I suggest we do this by avoiding the kind of who, when, and why questions that place the solution of a problem beyond our own domain of personal control and responsibility.

Instead, I recommend we plant the seeds for personal responsibility with the simple question, "What can I do to help?". This puts the focus on personal action within one's domain of personal influence. While the action may not solve the whole problem, it will certainly be a start. And it will set the example for others to take personal responsibility to contribute. The result: An overwhelming problem is solved through the synergy of multiple talents from a variety of people taking personal responsibility.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor and Director
Center for Applied Behavior Systems
Virginia Tech

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions help people develop, refine, and implement personal responsibility strategies within their domain of influence that prevent workplace injuries. For more information about related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233. Also, log on to www.spcoach.com to learn about an innovative internet approach to teaching these and other principles and procedures for improving the human dynamics of your workplace.