

Are You Mindful or Mindless?

How about this group exercise for a safety meeting? Pass out a raisin to everyone at the meeting and ask the participants to place the raisin on their tongues. Then, request the individuals to close their eyes and very slowly chew on their raisin, attending to every aspect of the raisin -- its shape, its texture, its taste. The aim is to become aware or mindful of every aspect of this single raisin-eating experience. Why would you want employees at a safety meeting to perform this simple task?

Psychotherapists use this raisin-eating exercise to help people reduce their adverse reaction to stressors. In fact, this is a common stress-reduction exercise for heart patients who need to decrease their blood pressure. The exercise reminds me of frequent advice my mother gave me whenever she saw me rushing around to accomplish an overload of tasks, "Don't forget to stop and smell the roses."

So you might use the raisin exercise as a stress-reduction technique. By having participants slow down to experience the process of eating a single raisin, they learn how to intentionally slow down their thinking and body processes and put themselves in a state of relaxation. The experience can also help people appreciate value in "stopping to smell the roses." In addition, I believe this exercise has special benefit for safety. It can teach people the difference between mindful and mindless work practices.

When Is Behavior Mindless?

Have you ever found yourself somewhere with no recollection of how you got there? You know it took several behaviors and decisions to get there, but you don't remember making the decisions and completing the sequence of tasks. This even happens to people while driving a vehicle. They arrive at a particular destination,

perhaps even the wrong place, but are not mindful of the series of choices made to get there. It's as if the vehicle "drove itself," an expression we use to acknowledge results of a routine set of behaviors. This is when behavior becomes mindless.

People sometimes move through daily regimes with little thought, alertness, or creativity. The more mundane and commonplace the activity, the more likely a person will use an unconscious script to guide behavior with an accompanying lack of awareness. This is mindless activity, and social psychologists warn us that in this state we are particularly susceptible to marketing and social influence tactics. In this condition we're particularly influenced by sales pitches and authoritative directives. Plus, there is significant risk of injury when we are in this mindless state.

How many injuries occur because people were "just not thinking"? How often do we get into a set work routine in which a sequence of behaviors is performed unconsciously? We take our mind off the process and put ourselves in automatic mode. This is fine if all these habitual behaviors are safe, but what if an at-risk shortcut is interspersed in the behavioral sequence? What if an environmental event requires an immediate adjustment in our behavior, but our lack of awareness or mindlessness at the time prevents prompt reaction? Without even realizing it, our mindless work practice puts us at-risk for injury.

Becoming More Mindful

So it is to our advantage to become less mindless and more mindful of behavioral routines that could lead to injury, either to ourselves or to others. How can we do this? Should we eat more raisins on the job? No, but we can reflect on the raisin experience to understand the difference between these two awareness states. Then we

can attempt to focus on the various process activities of our job, just like we can attend to each aspect of chewing on a raisin.

It is useful to write down the distinct steps of a job, and reflect on the possibilities of an at-risk behavior and injury at each step. Was this already accomplished in the job safety analysis (JSA) of your job? Perhaps it was, but that JSA could be long forgotten. A lot has happened since that initial JSA. And maybe you were not even involved in that systematic job analysis. This is about your awareness of the critical safe and at-risk behaviors involved in your daily work practices.

Optimal mindfulness of complex activities requires the interpersonal support of others. A group discussion of the safe and at-risk behaviors related to a particular job enables the synergistic development of a critical behavior checklist (CBC). It also spreads mindfulness across several individuals at once. This not only makes people mindful of the varied safe steps of a certain job, it also increases awareness that maximum mindfulness and protection from injury occurs when people look out for each other. Consider, for example, the mindfulness that results from using a CBC.

Raising Mindfulness With a CBC

Behavior-based trainers and consultants often focus on the power of behavioral feedback in increasing safe behaviors and reducing workplace injuries. In fact, I've heard some behavioral consultants proclaim that feedback is the most important behavior-change feature of an observation and feedback process. And, I have stressed the value of behavioral feedback in my own teaching and writing, as exemplified in my *ISHN* article last May. But here I'd like you to realize another behavior-change

component of an observation and feedback process that at times is even more influential than feedback itself.

As indicated above, mindfulness about specific safety-related behaviors is increased prominently when a work team develops a CBC. But even more mindfulness occurs when a CBC is used. And this mindfulness is most immediately relevant for injury prevention.

Imagine one co-worker approaching another who's hard at work and asking, "Is this a good time for a behavioral audit?" Whether the answer is "yes" or "no," some amount of safety mindfulness is raised. Now consider the impact of the actual observation process on job-specific awareness. Volunteering to be observed, the worker is now mindful of every aspect of the work process. The employee is not only thinking about the specific items on the CBC, but is trying to be cognizant of every possible safety-related behavior of the task.

In the right context, the observed employee actually shows off individual ability to work safely. This is mindfulness at its best. It is initiated by an observation process that is up-front and behavioral, and only conducted with permission. This helps to build the proper context -- an atmosphere of interpersonal trust and mutual actively caring.

The individual feedback portion of this behavioral coaching process is certainly important. It serves to support the safe decisions a coworker makes, and provides an opportunity to improve the safety of a job. It also makes both employees, the person observed and the observer, more mindful of the multiple environmental and behavioral facets of the work process that could cause personal injury. I'm convinced this increased mindfulness is one of the most influential outcomes of a behavior-based

observation and feedback process, contributing significantly to its remarkable injury-prevention success.

In Conclusion

At the October 1998 Behavior Safety Now Conference in Dallas, a panelist stated that it's okay to conduct behavioral audits without an employee's permission. In fact, he indicated that his consulting teams often find situations where unannounced observations are especially beneficial. I had to disagree. I have not found a single situation that gives greater advantage to secretive rather than announced behavioral audits. I sincerely hope this brief discussion of mindfulness helps you see it this way too.

Unannounced observations might give a more realistic picture of the at-risk behaviors occurring out there, but such audits are conducted at the risk of reducing interpersonal trust and giving the impression that behavior-based safety is a negative "gotcha" program. And from a behavior-change perspective, observations without permission cannot raise safety mindfulness. It's likely the mindfulness developed and increased from an up-front and voluntary behavioral observation process is critical for behavior change and injury prevention.

It's easy to fall into a mindless job routine, and become incapable of handling unexpected events in a safe and timely manner. Plus, some mindless behavior can put a person at immediate risk for personal injury. We need to understand that this can happen to anyone. Therefore we need to make a concerted effort to increase people's mindfulness on the job. A behavior-based observation and feedback process provides the mechanism for making this happen. But to get the best from such a process, we

need to be mindful of what it takes to develop and maintain an atmosphere of interpersonal trust and "actively caring."

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Senior Partner,
Safety Performance Solutions
Professor,
Virginia Tech

NOTE: Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help organizations develop the kind of observation and feedback process that maximizes safety mindfulness. For information on related books, training manuals, videotapes, audiotapes, and customized consulting please call SPS at (540) 951-7233 (SAFE) or check our web page at www.safetyperformance.com