

## **Ask Others for Safety Feedback**

In my ISHN article last month, I offered guidelines for improving the delivery of interpersonal safety feedback. But knowing how to deliver feedback effectively will not improve performance unless people exchange behavior-based feedback on a regular basis. And many people are reluctant to give feedback to others, especially when the topic is safety. Safety (in contrast with production) is usually perceived as personal. We might feel comfortable discussing personal issues with family members, but not with coworkers. For example, we don't hesitate to remind members of our immediate family to "buckle up," but if coworkers choose not to use personal protective equipment, that's their own business.

How can we increase people's willingness to give and receive safety feedback? This paper addresses the important challenge implicated by this question. In other words, what can we do to increase the use of interpersonal feedback to decrease at-risk behavior and increase safe behavior? I suggest you start by consistently asking others for safety feedback.

### **Asking for Feedback**

Safety coaches realize that improvement is only possible with feedback, so they not only give feedback but they ask others for feedback. When you ask another person for feedback and show appreciation for that person's specific, timely, and appropriate advice, you increase the likelihood that your feedback will be accepted by that person. In other words, when you show a desire to improve your own performance by asking for specific advice from an observer, you are teaching by example the key to safety improvement. Plus, you have established a reciprocal feedback relationship with another individual. Your request and appreciation for another person's behavioral advice opens the door for that person's receptivity of feedback from you.

And, if you ask questions to make the feedback you request specific, timely, appropriate, and real (see my [ISHN](#) article last month), you are teaching the proper way to give feedback.

So, how should you ask for feedback? If after your performance, you merely ask “How did I do?,” you are assuring timely advice, but the reaction you receive might not be specific enough to be instructive. In fact, some feedback requests like this might give the impression that you’re really not asking for genuine advice, but are only “fishing” for a compliment. This is especially the case when your performance was pretty good, which is usually the case when a person asks for feedback.

It’s quite rare for people to ask for feedback following personal performance they perceive to be inferior or below average. Yet this is exactly the time when specific behavior-based feedback can be most useful. But, without your request for specific feedback in these situations, it’s possible you’ll never learn how to improve. Indeed, your friends and coworkers are most reluctant to offer advice in those very situations where correction is most needed. They don’t want to hurt your feelings.

So, my advice is to ask for feedback often in such a way that it invites correction. Begin asking for specific feedback after your good performances. Then, show sincere appreciation for small improvements your friends and coworkers suggest. This will make it easier for you to ask for feedback following your below-average performance. And, if your friends and coworkers have been given the opportunity to make deposits in your emotional bank account, as a result of your feedback request following your better performance, they will be more willing to make a withdrawal and offer corrective feedback when it is most critical. But, the question remains -- how should you ask for specific and genuine feedback following a performance you perceive as good. I suggest you get in the habit of using a ten-point rating scale.

**The ten-point rating scale.** As I mentioned above, your request for feedback following good performance could be perceived as insincere or as a probe for commendation. However, what if you follow your statement “How did I do?” with “Please, give my performance a rating from one to ten, with one being completely inadequate and ten being perfect.” Do you see how this opens the door for specific feedback? Your friend or coworker might give you a high rating of “8” or “9,” even “9.5,” but it’s likely the score will not be a perfect “10.” This gives you the opportunity to ask, “So, what can I do to come closer to a perfect 10?”

Your friend or coworker has made a deposit by giving you a relatively high score on your 10-point scale. Then you show sincere desire to reach perfection, and ask for a withdrawal. You have made it comfortable for your friend to give corrective feedback. Your follow-up questions could teach your friend how to be more specific and appropriate when giving feedback. Perhaps you’ll convince your friend to be a more careful observer of your performance next time, in order to help you achieve a “perfect 10.” Such interpersonal communication will cultivate the kind of interdependency that enables ongoing continuous improvement. Nothing can bring you closer to “perfect 10” performance, especially in situations where appropriate feedback is not naturally available.

**When you need it most.** Some of our behavior is naturally followed by consequences we can use to improve our performance. When we hammer a nail, type a word, shoot a basketball, or organize our work area, we observe natural consequences that give us feedback about our performance. However, even in these situations an observer could give us specific feedback applicable for improving our future performance. We might put the basketball in the hoop or hit the nail on the head, for example, but a careful and knowledgeable observer could give us valuable feedback about our form that could improve our accuracy or reduce the

probability of a cumulative trauma disorder (like carpal tunnel syndrome). But such precise and invaluable feedback is only possible if we invite others to observe our performance, and then show genuine interest in receiving corrective feedback.

Let's take the simple everyday performance of a handshake. Isn't this simple behavior extremely important in making an initial impression and setting the stage for constructive or friendly communication? How many times have you received a "fish" or "wimp" handshake and immediately thought negatively about the person you're meeting? Or, perhaps you've thought less of a person following a crushing "Superman handshake." But, here's the most important question, "How many times have *you* given a handshake that was not a "perfect 10," and thus influenced a less-than-optimal impression?

You can't answer my last question unless you've received specific and objective feedback about your handshake. When is the last time you shook someone's hand, and then asked, "How was it?". And, after they reluctantly say, "fine," you retort with, "No really I'm serious, on a scale of one to ten, how would you rate my handshake?". Your friend gives you an "8.5," leaving you an opportunity to ask, "What can I do to reach a perfect 10."

Perhaps you see my handshake example as silly or unrealistic. But, reflect for a moment on the importance of this simple behavior, and the fact that you can only improve this social behavior with feedback you're not going to get unless you ask for it. Now reflect on the numerous safety-related behaviors we perform everyday without any feedback we can use to improve. Usually the environment does not give us natural feedback regarding the safety of our ongoing behavior. Careful observers of our behaviors could tell us how to make small adjustments in our performance in order to reduce the possibility of an injury. But, just as you

are reluctant to give others personal advice about their handshake, people are apt to feel uncomfortable making specific suggestion about a coworker's at-risk behavior.

Asking others for specific feedback about the safety of your own performance is one sure way to open up the lines of invaluable feedback communication among coworkers. So please consider the critical example you will set with the interpersonal question, "On a scale of one-to-ten, with one being 'completely unsafe' and ten being 'completely safe,' how safe was my performance you observed?"

### **In Conclusion**

Giving other people behavior-based feedback could be perceived as potentially awkward and is certainly inconvenient. There's barely enough time to look after ourselves in these busy times. How can we find time and opportunity to look out for others? Plus, people naturally resist giving other persons feedback about personal matters, and safety is often perceived as personal. Therefore, people are not quick to offer other individuals feedback about their safe or at-risk behavior.

One extremely important thing we can do to counteract the natural tendency to avoid giving safety feedback is to ask other people for feedback. When we ask others for feedback about the safety of our own performance, we open the door for more interpersonal interaction regarding safe and at-risk behavior. And, when the other person gives us the feedback we request, the principle of reciprocity comes into play. You should feel the person who gives you safety feedback following your request will now be more willing to accept your feedback.

Asking for personal performance feedback, however, does not guarantee you'll receive feedback that is specific and suitable enough to improve future performance. Thus, you should be prepared to probe for more specificity. Don't accept general statements like "you did fine."

Try using the “10-point rating scale” method. This shows the other person you’re really serious about learning something you can use to improve your performance. This approach has two very important benefits: 1) It is likely you will receive information you can use to improve future performance, and 2) you will be teaching another person some critically important principles about giving and receiving behavior-based feedback. These interpersonal benefits occur over and over en route to achieving a Total Safety Culture.

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NOTE: Dr. Geller teaches effective feedback strategies during his spirited two-day seminar series on “Achieving a Total Safety Culture.” For more information, call Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-SAFE (7233).