

Empathic Correction

Conversation was the theme of my last two *ISHN* columns (January and February, 2000). In January, I discussed the powerful influence of communication with others (interpersonal) and with ourselves (intrapersonal). I claimed that the dramatic success of behavior-based safety in reducing industrial injuries is basically due to improving the quality and increasing the quantity of interpersonal conversations.

In my February article, I described specific techniques for improving safety-related conversations, both with others and with ourselves. I discussed active listening with respect to getting in touch with our premature reactive filters that bias what we hear and limit what we learn from interpersonal conversation. I also presented advantages of a nondirective approach to corrective action, whereby more questions are asked and less directions are given than with the more traditional directive approach. In other words, before offering advice, we give other persons a chance to state their position, give their excuses, and own their mistake or calculated risk. Simply put, we use our listening skills to show empathy for the other person's situation before giving our perspective.

This article is about empathy and corrective action. It's important to understand the profound meaning of empathy, and to appreciate its value in facilitating learning. When we show more empathy in our interpersonal conversations, we have more impact in improving attitudes and behaviors. When we show others, through empathic listening, that we really understand their position, we maximize the chance of progress. This Kind of conversation will include more future possibilities for betterment and greater commitment for follow through.

What is Empathy?

Empathy is not the same as sympathy, although dictionary definitions are similar. *The New Merriam Webster Dictionary* (1989) defines sympathy as “the capacity for entering into and sharing the feelings or interests of another” (p.727), and empathy as “the capacity for experiencing as one’s own the feelings of another” (p. 248). Likewise, my *American Heritage Dictionary* (1991) defines empathy as “identification with and understanding of another’s situation, feeling, and motives” (p.449), in contrast to sympathy as “a feeling or expression of pity or sorrow for the distress of another person” (p.1231). Thus, we sympathize when we express concern or understanding for another individual’s situation, but we empathize when we identify with another person’s situation and realize what it’s like to be in the other person’s shoes.

An empathic level of awareness and appreciation is not easy to achieve, and can only be reached after we minimize the reactive filters that bias our conversations, and listen intently and proactively to another person. Not only must we hear every word, but we must also look for feelings, passion, and commitment reflected as much in body language and manner of expression as in the words themselves. The following true story illustrates the meaning of empathy and reveals its power to facilitate corrective action.

An Empathic Tennis Instructor

Last fall I witnessed a most unusual and effective tennis lesson. Later I realized how empathy was at the heart of this success story. With an ingenious application of empathy, Josh corrected a critical flaw in the forehand tennis stroke of Frank, my longtime tennis opponent.

Frank's previous forehand winners were now only defensive returns. As a result, our frequent singles matches on my clay tennis court were dramatically lopsided. I expected to win every set, and so did he. Eventually, he lost interest in our regular competition, and I lost a regular tennis opponent.

Josh Williams, a friend and partner at Safety Performance Solutions, is extremely talented at tennis – clearly the best I've ever rallied with, which includes a variety of professional tennis instructors. He played varsity tennis for four years at Kalamazoo College in Michigan, and subsequently taught tennis professionally at John Newcome's Tennis Resort in New Braunfels, Texas. I asked Josh to help Frank get his forehand stoke back, and he graciously accepted the challenge. In fact, he indicated appreciation for an opportunity to test his coaching skills.

When Josh arrived at my tennis court, I asked him if he wanted to watch Frank and I rally for a while so he could assess the problem. I'd seen numerous tennis instructors use this approach. They observe a client hit a tennis ball a number of times, and then provide directive feedback by verbalizing and demonstrating certain behavioral changes. Then they observe some more and give specific feedback.

I was surprised when Josh declined my assistance, and instead took my side of the court and began rallying with Frank. He hit the ball back and forth with Frank a number of times without saying a word about any problem. He just said "Nice shot" a number of time to commend good performance.

At one point, Josh stopped rallying and asked Frank where he thought he was having difficulty. Convinced he knew his problem, Frank discussed the way he grips his racket when shifting from a backhand to forehand stroke. Frank does hold his racket

differently than most (using what's referred to as a Western grip instead of the more common Eastern grip).

Josh agreed with Frank's diagnosis, and asked him to rally some more balls. This time Josh used the same Western grip as Frank, and mimicked his forehand stroke. In this way, Josh could understand exactly how it felt to be in Frank's tennis shoes. When switching from a backhand to forehand stroke, Josh changed his grip exactly as Frank in order to appreciate the difficulty Frank was experiencing.

To make my point, it's not necessary to give more details about this very effective tennis lesson. Josh truly empathized with Frank's situation, and as a result he could provide most relevant advice. And because Josh demonstrated genuine understanding and appreciation of his client's problem, his advice was readily accepted. Thus, through empathy a coach shows both caring and credibility, and eventually makes the most valid recommendations for improvement. And the empathic coach learns what it takes to support a client's successive attempts to do better.

A Lesson for Safety Leaders

Few individuals could give the kind of tennis instruction I witnessed from Josh Williams. It takes a special talent to imitate another individual's defective tennis stroke, and then demonstrate how to make successive adjustments to eliminate a flaw. But we can become more empathic when developing and directing a corrective action plan for work behavior that is flawed with regard to safety.

When we observe another person's work practices, we can try and view the situation from that individual's perspective. When we listen to excuses for at-risk behavior or for an injury, we can try and see ourselves in the same predicament. We

can imagine what defense mechanisms we might use to protect our ego or self-esteem. And when we consider action plans for improvement, we can try and view various alternatives through the eyes of the other person.

Are you thinking that it's difficult to see the work situation through the eyes of another person? It's not as straightforward as imitating another person's tennis stroke. Right. Therefore, empathic safety leaders need to ask more questions in order to truly understand the other person's position and eventually diagnose the problem. And they need to listen for more than words when workers give evaluations of their at-risk behavior and offer recommendations for self-improvement. Listen for feelings or emotions that reflect concern for errors and commitment to change.

In Conclusion

This discussion addressed the highest level of interpersonal conversation – a level difficult to attain but one that can do wonders at facilitating mutual learning and behavioral improvement. Not only will the corrective action derived from empathic communication be most relevant, it will be most acceptable. In other words, leaders who demonstrate sincere understanding and appreciation for other people's circumstances are more likely to be followed. And when leaders' directives are based on an empathic diagnosis of the situation, they are more effective.

Obviously, empathic listening, diagnosing, and action planning takes patience. Conversations at this level are not efficient, but they are effective. The leader's objective is to first learn, mostly through questioning and listening, what it's like to be in the other person's situation. Then the objective shifts to developing a corrective intervention that fits the circumstances as mutually understood by everyone involved in

the conversation. If commitment to follow through with a specific action plan is stated, you've had a most effective conversation.

Are you thinking, this is easier said than done? Well, you're probably right. But consider that we're only talking about taking a different perspective into our corrective action conversations. Specifically, we need to approach our coaching conversations with an empathic mindset. We want to learn what it's like to be in the situation where at-risk behavior occurs, and then help derive an action plan we would be willing to follow. We do this through empathic interpersonal conversation.

NOTE: Dr. Geller and his colleagues at Safety Performance Solutions help organizations develop and implement processes that facilitate empathic conversation and correction. For more information please call (540) 951-7233 (SAFE), e-mail us at safetyperformance@safety.com, or visit our web site at www.safetyperformance.com