

Fueling Participation with Seven Principles from Social Psychology

This is the last of a four-part series of *ISHN* articles addressing the challenge of getting more people involved in occupational safety. The first three articles (Feb.-Apr., 2002) reviewed 30 research-based principles or guidelines relevant to increasing people's willingness to perform the variety of daily activities needed to prevent workplace injuries. This article reviews seven additional principles, gleaned from social science research, you can use to analyze the interpersonal factors hindering optimal involvement in safety and decide which can be changed to fuel more participation. We start with the powerful principle of *commitment and consistency* which our recent research suggests is generally the most popular and clearly relevant to increasing participation.

1. We Try to be Consistent in Thought and Deed

Simply put, when we make a choice or take a stand, we encounter personal and social pressures to perform consistently with our commitment. When people show inconsistencies between their promises and their behaviors, they are given such unflattering labels as "flighty," "confused," "scatterbrained," "neurotic," or "two-faced." This principle accounts for people's resistance to change, while also explaining why a change in behavior often leads to a corresponding change in attitude, and vice versa.

Commitments are most influential when they are public, active, and perceived as voluntary or not coerced. Thus, it's more beneficial to have employees make a public rather than a private commitment to perform a certain safe behavior. And, it's better to have them sign their name to a card or public display than to merely raise their hands.

People live up to what they write down. Of course, it's very important for those pledging to do something for safety to believe they made the commitment voluntarily.

2. We Reciprocate to Return a Favor

Have you ever felt uncomfortable after someone did you a favor? Or have you ever turned down a favor because you didn't want to feel obligated to return the favor? This is the reciprocity principle in action. It's reflected in the slogan, "Do for me and I'll do for you." In other words, if you're nice to people, they will feel obligated to return the favor.

What does this mean for safety management? It means we should look for opportunities to go out of our way for another person's safety. When we actively care for someone else's safety, we set the tone for reciprocity. We increase the likelihood that person will actively care for the safety of someone else.

3. We Participate With People We Like

For whom would you feel most obligated after they did you a favor – someone you like or someone you dislike? And, for whom are you more likely to protect from a potential injury – a team of workers you like or a work team you don't like? The answers to these questions are obvious and reflect the basic liking rule. Because of this principle, we need to increase and sustain interpersonal liking in our work cultures.

Social psychologists have demonstrated three basic ways to establish a context of interpersonal liking, with each approach suggesting a number of specific strategies. Let's briefly consider each of these.

Emphasize Similarities

We like people who are like us. In other words, it's a myth that "unlikes attract." Rather, "birds of a feather flock together." Through initial informal conversation and astute observation, you can find out commonalities between you and others you'd like to influence. You might find you enjoy the same hobbies or recreational activities, or have had matching educational backgrounds or employment histories, or have similar opinions about current events, corporate issues, and even politics. You can forge a liking bond by discussing topics that accent interpersonal similarities.

Give Praise

Last month (April 2002) my *ISHN* article reviewed techniques for giving genuine one-to-one praise, recognition, and rewarding feedback. This is done to increase an individual's competence (*ISHN* Feb. 2002) and self-efficacy (*ISHN* March 2002). Here's another reason for praising someone's performance. It increases liking -- in both directions. The person you reward likes you more; and because you have noticed behavior that deserves recognition, you will increase your appreciation for the person who performed that behavior.

Promote Cooperation

Social psychologists have tracked increases in interpersonal liking when individuals transition from competitive to cooperative situations. This probably seems like "common sense" because you've experienced this change in interpersonal liking many times, from personal participation in athletic contests and community projects to competitive vs. cooperative interaction on work assignments.

The greater the perception of interdependency toward the achievement of a common goal, the greater the interpersonal liking. This connects with the need to promote a sense of belonging and interdependency throughout a work culture, as I discussed in my *ISHN* column last month (April 2002).

4. We Follow the Crowd

This is the principle of consensus or conformity. It is certainly not new to any reader. We see examples of conformity every day, from the types of clothes people wear to their particular styles of communication in both written correspondence and verbal presentation. The producers of comedy shows use canned laughter to cause more audience laughter. Advertisers sell their wares by displaying others using the product. Bartenders “salt” their tip jars to increase gratuities. And, night clubs, movie theaters, and restaurants attract customers when long lines indicate popularity.

Thus, the role of conformity in influencing participation cannot be overlooked. Plus, we need to realize that group pressure to conform is greater when the consensus group is larger and when the group members are seen as relatively experienced. In addition, people are most likely to look to the behavior of others as a guide for their own behavior when the situation is unfamiliar to them – when they feel uncertain about what to do.

Therefore, experienced employees should feel especially responsible to demonstrate safe work practices when new employees are in their midst. In the same vein, supervisors should provide new hires with opportunities to work with those experienced employees who are most enthusiastic about participating in safety-related

activities. When these experienced employees have credible authority, the next social influence principle adds to the beneficial impact.

5. The Power of Authority

From childhood we have learned to appreciate and follow legitimate authority – from “mother knows best” to the “boss knows best.” This gives us an excuse to escape taking personal responsibility for what we are doing. In other words, if someone with authority tells us to take a risk, we’re often willing to comply because if something goes wrong, it won’t be our fault. We can blame the person who told us to do it.

It’s not hard to see what all of this has to do with safety in the workplace. We need to be aware of the power of authority, and encourage people to resist the temptation to follow orders blindly and mindlessly.

6. The Value of Scarcity

Have you ever gone out of your way to purchase front-row tickets to a sporting event or music concert? Have you ever jammed into a department store to take advantage of a “special limited-time” bargain? Have you ever participated at an auction where one-of-a-kind items are displayed and sold to the highest bidder? Or, maybe you’re a collector of rare coins, stamps, baseball cards, or antique furniture? Each of the situations implied by these questions illustrates how the value of something increases with the perception of scarcity.

The Unique Opportunity

So what can the scarcity principle tell us about getting more people involved in a safety process? First, I think it suggests we ought to emphasize the unique features of a safety process. How is a particular approach to injury prevention better than the rest?

How is it leading edge? When people believe they have a rare opportunity to test a new – even “experimental” – approach to occupational safety, their motivation is facilitated by the scarcity principle.

The Fear of Losing

Social psychologists have shown that people are especially motivated to avoid a loss. Think about it. When it's evident that you need to act immediately in order to avoid losing something, you are aroused to mindful action.

We see this work to motivate participation in safety-related activities when the potential loss is evident (as when a relevant personal testimony is given) and self-efficacy and response-efficacy are promoted. This is when scare tactics work to provoke desired behavior (see my *ISHN* article last July 2001 for more about effective scare tactics, and my *ISHN* article last March 2002 for an explanation of these belief states and why personal testimonials should be used to increase these beliefs and thereby fuel participation).

7. Novelty Attracts Attention

We have all experienced a novelty effect. As with the scarcity principle, we are attentive and drawn to the quality of uniqueness. But in this case uniqueness means new or different rather than scarce or rare.

Interpersonal Relationships

Social psychologists have examined this principle with regard to interpersonal attraction and interrelationships. More specifically, the novelty principle is reflected in our desire for excitement and surprise in our interpersonal experiences. The appeal of

newness and unpredictability facilitates the beginning of a relationship, while the lack of novelty in a familiar routine can be the key factor in the breakup of a relationship.

The impact of the novelty principle on participation in a safety process is analogous to its influence on relationship building and splitting. The uniqueness of a new approach to injury prevention promotes initial involvement; but over time, the same safety routine can seem dull and uninspiring – leading to a drop in the quantity or quality of participation.

Intervention Implications

What can we do to overcome the loss of novelty and consequential participation? Again, our common sense is useful because we've experienced the rise and fall of personal excitement with fluctuations in novelty. We've learned the value of incorporating the unexpected in a relationship. Plus, we've seen the beneficial impact of varying the procedures in a work routine. So the recommended intervention approach is simple in principle, if not in practice. It's important to find ways to vary aspects of a particular safety process.

Actually, changing the features of a safety process is essential for continuous improvement. Therefore a mechanism for continually refining and up-grading the procedures of a safety-improvement process should be established at the start. This usually requires the continual involvement of a safety steering committee that solicits and reviews employee suggestions for program refinement, decides which refinement(s) to implement first, and then monitors the impact of certain changes to an injury-prevention process. Thus, the appropriate action of a safety steering committee

not only supports the vision of “neverending improvement,” but also maintains a degree of novelty in the safety-related activities of an organization.

In Conclusion

The social dynamics of an organization reflect the culture and influence the culture at the same time. That is, certain aspects of a work setting affect social dynamics, and in turn these social dynamics alter the culture. The seven social influence principles described here reveal basic social dynamics. They can inhibit or facilitate participation for occupational safety.

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