

## Getting Gung Ho About Safety

Last fall (November 1999) I attended a day-long seminar by Dr. Kenneth Blanchard, coauthor of the classic best seller, “The One-Minute Manager.” The title of this session was “Building Gung Ho Teams: How to Turn People Power into Profits.” For me, the most informative and inspirational aspect of this day was my introduction to the 1998 book by Ken Blanchard and Sheldon Bowles, entitled “Gung Ho! Turn On the People in Any Organization.” This book reveals three basic “secrets” for getting more enthusiastic involvement from people.

The three secrets of Gung Ho are similar to the principles behind the various safety-improvement tools and methods I’ve described previously in my *ISHN* column. That’s obviously why I was so appreciative of Dr. Blanchard’s seminar. But Ken Blanchard has a unique talent for describing principles of human dynamics in ways that inspire profound understanding and special appreciation. And his creativity provokes the “teacher” in all of us to share the insight with others.

Thus, I want to teach you the three secrets of Gung Ho as they relate to increasing involvement in safety-related efforts. The information won’t be new to readers of my *ISHN* column, but the creative way of stating the obvious is invaluable. So learn these three secrets to improve your ability at teaching basic philosophies you already know but perhaps don’t use enough.

### **Secret 1: The Spirit of the Squirrel**

This secret is revealed by watching squirrels scurrying about collecting and storing food. They work at high energy because they are motivated, and they are

motivated because their work is critically important. If they don't store enough food for the winter months they will starve. So the Spirit of the Squirrel is "worthwhile work."

If people can be convinced their work is worthwhile, they will be more motivated on the job. Blanchard advises us to help people see the bigger picture regarding their daily work routine. The bricklayer, for example, could describe his job as "laying brick" or as "building a community recreation center to bring people together for healthy recreation and exercise." Both descriptions are accurate, but the latter mission sounds more worthwhile and can stimulate more self-motivation.

Similarly, a work crew washing windows at a restaurant could consider their job as only washing windows or as providing clear vision for customers. Dishwashers in a university cafeteria might think they are only cleaning food from dishes, but they are really assuring students don't get sick from bacteria. Perhaps a car mechanic believes he is only repairing a vehicle, but really he is making it possible for people to travel safely from one important destination to another. And the receptionist is not merely answering telephones, rather she is an ambassador for her company. She is the "Executive Director of First Impressions."

Bottom line: Help people see the bigger picture regarding their job. Whatever their profession, they are making a difference. They are helping to make the world a better place.

Safety professionals naturally have the Spirit of the Squirrel. Their work is obviously worthwhile. They are taking care of everyone's primary asset – their safety and health. The challenge is to convince people that the routine safety-related

activities, from wearing uncomfortable protective equipment to conducting periodic environmental and behavioral audits, are really worthwhile.

Personal testimony is more effective than company statistics at showing people how their safety-related behaviors can make a difference. When people can visualize injuries prevented by their involvement in a safety program, they can believe their safety work is worthwhile. Like the squirrel's work, their safety-related behavior assures their colleagues and friends will make it through the winter and beyond.

### **Secret 2: The Way of the Beaver**

Although squirrel behavior is fluent and filled with purposive energy, it can be rather chaotic and non-cooperative. In fact, if you watch squirrels long enough, you're bound to see some win-lose conflict. Two squirrels might fight over a single acorn, and acorns buried by one squirrel for the winter will be another squirrel's treasure if they are found. In other words, squirrel's work hard but they do so independently.

Beavers work interdependently. They have the Spirit of the Squirrel, but as the more intelligent rodent, they cooperate to get the job done. The beavers in a working colony seem to have their own job assignments. They "work like beavers" to complete various important tasks. Some collect and store twigs and sticks for winter food, others gnaw down trees for dams, others drag or float lumber to the site of a dam or their lodge home, others dig canals for floating logs long distances, and other beavers plug spaces between dam logs with stones and mud. And, if one beaver senses a predator, it slaps its tail hard on the surface of the water to make a loud noise and warn other beavers.

Blanchard emphasized that there is no "boss beaver." You can't watch beavers work and determine who is in charge. The Way of the Beaver is being self-directed in

achieving goals that benefit everyone. In other words, the Way of the Beaver means defining each worker's domain of influence as it relates to specific shared goals, and then letting each individual take control of his or her job. Employees are not expected to leave their brains at home, but instead are in charge of their domains of responsibility.

This secret exemplifies empowerment as I've described in prior *ISHN* articles. People who feel empowered believe they can make a difference and are more likely to actively care for the safety and health of others. The three person states that determine degree of empowerment are self-efficacy ("I can do it"), personal control ("I'm in control"), and optimism ("I expect the best").

The Way of the Beaver reflects the three person states that research has linked to perceptions of empowerment. Beavers know their job (self-efficacy) and are in personal control of achieving their interdependent goals. And optimism that their goals will be reached is reflected in the consistent eagerness each beaver shows throughout the process of completing worthwhile work.

### **Secret 3: The Gift of the Goose**

Interdependency is epitomized by geese when they travel together. They fly in a "V" formation with a leader up front and each following goose flying in the draft created by a goose in front. Periodically the lead goose who gets no facilitating draft and must deal with head wind moves back in the "V" and another goose takes on the lead role. That's the interdependent way of the goose.

When watching geese fly in their interdependent "V" formation, you can't help but notice something else – a honking sound. Which geese are honking? Answer: all of

them. Each goose periodically and frequently honks, as if they are cheering each other on. That's the Gift of the Goose. Geese provide each other with constant verbal support, thereby recognizing how each member of the flying team contributes to the group effort. Their "cheering" encourages continued cooperation.

This gift of recognizing and encouraging behaviors that contribute to optimizing a system is not new to most readers. It reflects the remarkable power of positive reinforcement and is a key principle of behavior-based safety. This occurs when we look for behaviors that indicate an individual is going beyond the call of duty for the safety of another person, and then provide one-on-one and genuine recognition when we see such behavior. This gift also occurs when groups gather to celebrate their safety achievements, from completing a certain number of process activities to reaching a record number of days without a lost-time injury.

When work cultures display as much cheerleading for safety-related behavior as reflected in a flock of geese, exemplary levels of injury prevention are attained. I've seen this happen when work groups implement behavior-based safety processes. Of course it takes more than appreciating and practicing this Gift of the Goose. It requires the team development of an interdependent observation and feedback process that effectively reduces at-risk behaviors and environmental conditions. Then injuries will be prevented. Now that's something to honk about.

### **In Conclusion**

For most readers, this article does not introduce any new principle, method, or tool for improving safety. But I hope you recognize another contribution. It provides a

unique and simple way to understand and teach what it generally takes to get more people excited about completing safety-related activities.

This description of three secrets to increase safety involvement was adapted from material I heard at a workshop given by Ken Blanchard and read in a book authored by Drs. Blanchard and Bowles. I naturally added my own interpretations and generalizations from the original material. I hope my extensions have done the original work justice. But the real justice will come when we all become more fluent at teaching and applying the Spirit of the Squirrel, the Way of the Beaver, and the Gift of the Goose.

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NOTE: Dr. Geller and his associates at Safety Performance Solutions, Inc. (SPS) help organizations implement behavioral safety processes that operationalize the principles discussed here. For more information about books, videotapes, audiotapes, seminars, and customized training, please call SPS at (540) 951-7233, e-mail us at [safety@safetyperformance.com](mailto:safety@safetyperformance.com), or visit our web site at [www.safetyperformance.com](http://www.safetyperformance.com)