

Getting More Involvement in '05:

Top ten list of lessons learned

Happy New Year! This issue marks the start of my 15th year of contributing articles to *ISHN*. How time flies when you're having fun. Actually, preparing monthly contributions has been among my most challenging, yet inspiring and rewarding professional endeavors.

This assignment motivated me to read books I would not have read, attend conference presentations I would not have attended, conduct literature searches and behavioral research I would not have conducted, facilitate interpersonal and group discussions I would not have facilitated, and consider theories, ideas, topics, and intervention strategies I would not have considered.

This consequence-driven behavior has educated me beyond the most optimistic expectations, and enabled me to develop constructive and inspirational relationships with many passionate and caring safety pros. Thank you Dave Johnson and the rest of the *ISHN* team for this opportunity. I cannot find words sufficient to express my gratitude.

My Top Ten List

In this context of celebrating the beginning of my 15th year with *ISHN*, I'd like to offer ten prime ways to get people involved in injury-prevention efforts. Each of these is practical and supported by empirical research. I suggest considering this list as a guideline for developing specific intervention strategies. It could, in fact, serve as New Years Resolutions for the safety pros who want to achieve more employee participation in their injury-prevention campaigns.

10. Make Safety Personal

How do successful advertisers sell their products? They display individuals similar to their potential customers enjoying the benefits of their products. In contrast, many organizations try to motivate safety involvement with group statistics like total recordable injury rate or worker compensation costs. This takes the focus away from what people relate to - - other people.

9. Teach and Motivate with Personal Stories.

A well-told, personal story activates vivid imagery. Listeners can put themselves in the position of the story-teller and feel relevant emotions. When the story is linked to a related lesson, learning is facilitated and remembered. Thus, master teachers use personal stories to both motivate people and help them learn.

8. Accompany Scare Tactics with Action Plans.

A personal story about the consequential pain and suffering of an injury is emotional and motivational. Listeners who visualize themselves in the same aversive predicament, experience fear and anxiety. They are ready to take action to prevent such negative consequences in their own lives. This is the prime time to teach an injury-prevention technique. Bottom line: A scary story is especially good for safety when it is accompanied by a proactive action plan.

7. Activate and Support Success Seeking.

While scare tactics and prevention strategies activate desirable behavior, they can also lead to an undesirable attitude or mindset. People will work hard to avoid an unpleasant event like an injury, but they may not feel good about the experience. When the focus is on avoiding failure, one's sense of personal control and freedom is stifled.

And if the prevention efforts do not work, you can get failure acceptance, apathy, and feelings of helplessness.

The antidote: Substitute success seeking for failure avoiding. When people focus more on achieving success than avoiding failure, they feel more personal control and less distress. They are happier and more optimistic, and more likely to help others. Thus, we should define our injury-prevention efforts and results in achievement terms. Get people talking about what they do for safety, and discuss outcomes in terms of milestones accomplished instead of losses avoided.

6. Motivate with Positive Consequences.

Recognition for desirable performance is key to a success-seeking attitude. Only with rewards and recognition can behavior and attitude be improved at the same time. So, as trite as it sounds, become a “good finder.” Look for the good things people do and support that behavior with positive consequences. But, remember the power is in the delivery. Sincere one-to-one words of genuine appreciation are usually more influential than material rewards.

5. Focus on the Process.

A key way to promote success seeking, accentuate the positive, and increase participation in safety efforts is to believe and act on this popular slogan: “Success is a journey, not a destination.” When we focus on the various steps to a desired outcome, we create opportunities to support and celebrate successive accomplishments.

In safety, the focus is typically on negative outcomes, from OSHA recordables to compensation costs. With our attention on the negative and reactive scoreboard of total

recordables, it's easy to take our eyes off the "ball" – the proactive process things we need to do daily in order to prevent workplace injuries.

4. Use Behavior-Based Feedback.

Effective behavior change interventions usually incorporate a feedback component. Behavior-based recognition, rewards, coaching, training, and corrective action identify behaviors to support or improve. To some degree, each of these intervention approaches holds people accountable for what they do well and/or what can be improved.

As I discussed in prior *ISHN* articles, behavior-based feedback provides direction or motivation, or both of these, depending on its delivery. Various feedback approaches are detailed in the earlier articles (for example, see my *ISHN* contributions for March 2000, Feb 2000, May 1999, Aug 1996, and July 1996). Here I want to make the point that behavior-based feedback is necessary for performance improvement and competence building. Because people want to be more competent at what they believe is important, opportunities to receive feedback invite participation. Our challenge is to convince others that safety-related tasks are important.

3. Set SMART Goals.

"Zero injuries" reflects the vision of dedicated safety pros. It is a destination, not a goal. Goal-setting is a journey tool. Goals define the process efforts needed to prevent injuries.

SMART goals are empowering because they facilitate a process people believe is achievable, effective, and worth the effort. This is reflected in the words represented by

the letters of SMART: Specific, Motivational, Achievable, Relevant, and Trackable.

Refer to my earlier *ISHN* article in Sept. 1994 for details on how to set SMART goals.

2. Use Empowering Language.

For more than three decades I have been complaining about the unfortunate language used by safety pros. Words like “behavior modification,” “accident investigation,” “loss control,” “compliance training,” “root cause,” and “occupant restraint” come across as failure-oriented and freedom-limiting. They set the stage for fault-finding over fact-finding, peer pressure rather than peer support, win-lose competition instead of win-win collaboration, and top-down control rather than company-wide empowerment.

How we talk to ourselves and to others affects how we feel about ourselves and others. Our language both influences and reflects our culture. Thus, we need to take a careful look at our safety language and make necessary adjustments. For example, eliminate the terms “behavior modification,” “loss control,” and “compliance training.” We don’t need them. And, substitute “incident analysis” for “accident investigation,” “contributing factors” for “root causes,” and “safety belt” for “occupant restraint.”

1. Ask the Right Question.

Not only can some safety language be a “turn-off,” but the initial questions we ask when approaching an injury-prevention challenge can also stifle constructive participation. Consider the effects of questions like “Who did that?,” “Why was that hazard not removed earlier?,” “What is the root cause of this injury?,” and “Why didn’t you follow the OSHA guidelines?”

Notice how all of these questions project the problem beyond the person asking the question. Plus, they deflect a solution to someone else. Someone or something beyond the control of the person asking the question is responsible for causing and solving the problem.

Notice how the perspective changes with this question, “How can I help?” It’s not “Why did that have to happen?,” but rather “What can I do to help correct the mishap?” It should not be “Why are you working at-risk?,” but instead “How can I help you adopt more safe work behaviors?”

In Conclusion

I sincerely hope these ten basic lessons serve as a useful framework for encouraging more active participation in your injury-prevention efforts. I recommend you start with the question “What can I do?,” and proceed to do whatever is within your domain of influence to focus on the positive and make your injury-prevention process more achievement-focused.

Remember the powerful impact of a personal story. But when you activate fear and negative emotion, be sure to offer some practical strategies for avoiding them. In other words, if you scare people into wanting to make a difference, tell them what they can do. In most cases, behavior-based feedback and SMART goal setting can be applied to improve an injury-prevention process. The result: genuine empowerment to work toward the vision of an injury-free workplace.

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