

How to Get More Involvement in Industrial Safety and Health: Part III

This month I offer ten more basic strategies for cultivating the kinds of beliefs, feelings, and attitudes that can fuel more participation in safety-related activities. More details on all 30 of the recommendations presented in this series, including the theory and research support behind each, are provided in my new book – *The Participation Factor* – published recently by the American Society of Safety Engineers.

The initial guideline in this list is very basic, and related to the first strategy I proposed – watch your language. More specifically, in the first *ISHN* article in this series (Feb. 2002), I specified words frequently used in safety that are detrimental to participation. “Accident investigation” is a prime example because it implies fault-finding over fact-finding – a perspective that can certainly stifle interpersonal involvement in analyzing and preventing an injury or “near miss.

1. Find Facts Rather Than Faults

To most people, an “investigation” means a search for some single cause or person to blame for a particular incident. As a result, it’s logical to conduct a “root cause analysis” and look for one primary fault.

This root cause approach stifles the open interpersonal conversation needed to analyze the situation completely. It can create a narrow, failure-oriented perspective with regard to incident analysis and injury prevention. People don’t want to talk about failure, especially if they suspect the finger of blame could point at them. Besides there really is no single root cause of an incident. Environmental, behavioral, and attitudinal factors *contribute to* almost every injury or “near miss.”

2. Diagnose Carefully Before Intervening

This guideline follows logically from the previous one. The purpose of fact-finding is to define the most appropriate corrective action plan. Safety engineers understand this, and are quite competent at dealing with environmental fixes. However, when it comes to addressing the human dynamics of an incident, incompetence is common. This is obvious from the numerous corrective action plans I've read in incidence reports.

The most frequent recommendations addressing the people aspects of corrective action are "The employee will be re-trained" and "The employee will be disciplined." These should actually be "last resort" interventions, and should not be common recommendations.

As I detailed in an earlier *ISHN* article (Nov. 1999), a proper behavioral safety analysis of the human dynamics of an incident requires a search for answers to the following ten questions, in the order given here.

- What is the discrepancy between observed and ideal performance?
- Is change called for?
- Can the task be simplified?
- Are expectations clear?
- Is performance feedback available?
- What are the natural or intrinsic consequences?
- Is there a skill discrepancy?
- Is the person right for the job?
- What kind of training is needed?

- Which corrective action is most cost effective?

The first eight questions need answers before training is relevant. That's because most participation problems relate to execution rather than aptitude or skill. In other words, workers usually know how to perform a job safely, but might work at-risk for various reasons addressed by the earlier questions in the list. Thus, you need to take the time to find the facts and interpret them carefully before planning a safety intervention.

A comprehensive corrective action plan will often include removing barriers to safe behavior, incorporating an observation and feedback process into the work routine, and adding a system for making people feel good about choosing safe over more convenient or comfortable at-risk behavior. This latter critical component of an action plan to increase the occurrence of safe work practices should incorporate the next three guidelines.

3. Deliver Quality Recognition

My Dec. 1996 *ISHN* article detailed how to give quality one-to-one recognition. It needs to be given privately not publicly. Remember that many people feel embarrassed when receiving special attention in a group context. Part of this discomfort is due to fear of subsequent harassment by peers.

When delivered correctly, positive recognition for safe behavior provides direction and motivation to continue that behavior, and improves one's attitude toward safety in general. But to fuel participation, we need to get more people involved in giving positive recognition for quality participation in occupational safety.

Your first challenge might be to convince people that recognition is needed. There seems to be a myth that people can get too much recognition. I'm sure you've heard the expression that too much recognition can give a person a "big head." Well, guess what? A big head is good. The more recognition people receive – the better they feel about themselves; and the better people feel about themselves – the more they will actively care for the safety of others.

4. Receive Recognition Well

As important as it is to give positive recognition correctly, it may be even more important to receive recognition well. That is, the reaction of a person receiving recognition determines whether people become more or less involved in using positive consequences to instruct and motivate safety-related participation. In Jan. 1997, my *ISHN* contribution discussed the following five guidelines for receiving recognition:

- Avoid denials and disclaimers.
- Actively listen with sincere appreciation.
- Relive the recognition later.
- Reward the recognition process.
- Ask for recognition when it's deserved.

5. Celebrate Process and Outcome Success

Group celebrations, when done correctly, can be an antidote for sagging morale. They can motivate teamwork, build a sense of belonging, and boost our desire to participate for the safety and health of others. My *ISHN* article in Feb. 1997 offered the following guidelines for conducting quality safety celebrations.

- Don't promote cheating by announcing an injury-reduction criterion needed for a celebration.
- Focus on the journey – the processes that contributed to reaching the injury-reduction milestone.
- Management should listen more than speak, and line workers should talk more about their participation than listen to managers' pleasure with the bottom line.
- Relive the participation by discussing the activities that led to success.
- Show how difficult it was to reach the milestone by pointing out hardships endured.
- Use tangible rewards that support the memory of an occasion by displaying a relevant safety theme or slogan.

6. Use Punishment as a Last Resort

Punishment is detrimental to long-term participation, and it can turn individuals and an entire work culture against those doing the punishing. Use punishment only after you've tried the many other more positive and effective techniques reflected by the strategies given here and in my two prior articles in this series on fueling participation. When you punish employees by sending them home without pay you've essentially given up on a particular individual, and prefer that s/he decides to work somewhere else.

If you must send people home for punishment let them have their pay and in return ask them to prepare a comprehensive plan for specific improvement, including ways to secure management and peer support. And after a supervisor approves an individual's

plan for corrective action, both should offer mutual commitment and support by signing a written summary of the improvement plan. This is a positive approach to “discipline,” reflecting the true meaning of this word – training or corrective action for continuous improvement. It reflects the next involvement principle.

7. Enhance the Actively Caring Person States

One of my earliest *ISHN* articles (Jan. 1993) discussed “actively caring” as a key to safety excellence, and defined certain person states – feelings, perceptions, or expectancies – that influence a person’s willingness to actively care for the safety or health of another individual. More specifically, research has shown that five person dimensions influence people’s willingness to help others: self-esteem (“I am valuable”), belonging (“I belong to a team”), self-efficacy (“I can do it”), personal control (“I am in control”), and optimism (“I expect the best”).

The strategies discussed in this series enhance these person states which in turn enhance actively caring. Try this: After discussing these actively caring person states with a work team, ask the participants to specify recent situations and/or activities that decreased and increased particular person states in them. Then brainstorm practical ways to cultivate these person states in the future. Participation in this kind of discussion can promote a sense of belonging among team members, which is the actively caring person state that relates most directly to the next principle.

8. Teach, Demonstrate, and Cultivate Interdependence

Interdependency is vital to meeting the challenge of attaining and sustaining an injury-free workplace. When people understand interdependency, they realize their safety-related behaviors influence the safety of others. They participate in a safety

process because they don't want anyone to get hurt, and they realize their good example contributes interdependently to the vision of an injury-free workplace. They also appreciate the next guideline for fueling participation.

9. Look Beyond the Numbers

With the slogan, "You can only manage what you can measure," managers focus on the numbers. Leaders look beyond the numbers. Leaders certainly appreciate the need to hold people accountable with numbers, but they also understand you can't measure everything. There are some things you do and ask others to do because you know it's the right thing to do.

Leaders believe, for example, it's important to increase employees' self-esteem or awareness of individual importance, feelings of empowerment, and a sense of belonging or interdependency. Yet they don't attempt to measure their success at increasing these actively caring person states. They do things on a regular basis to inspire these feeling states in others, but don't worry about measuring their direct impact on these intangibles.

10. Build and Maintain Momentum

It's fitting to end a list of ways to facilitate participation in occupational safety with a discussion of momentum. Let's consider the three factors I introduced in my Mar. 1999 *ISHN* article as keys to increasing momentum: *achievement* of the participants, *atmosphere* of the culture, and *attitude* of the coaches and team leaders. These three interdependent ingredients of momentum reflect many of the participation strategies discussed in this series.

Achievement of the Participants

Success builds success. Good performance is more likely after a run of successful behaviors than failures. In sports, a succession of winning plays or points scored creates momentum. This means you've got to keep score. You need a system to track small wins in safety that can build momentum. The following recommendations follow directly from strategies discussed earlier in this series.

- Develop up-stream process measures such as number of audits completed or percentage of safe behaviors occurring.
- Set process-oriented goals that are **Specific, Motivational, Achievable, Relevant, and Trackable**.
- Discuss safety performance in terms of accomplishment – what people have done for safety, and what additional achievement potential is within their domain of control.
- Recognize individuals appropriately for their accomplishments.
- Celebrate group or team accomplishments on a regular basis.

Atmosphere of the Culture

In sports, it's called the "home field advantage." It means having fans available to help initiate or sustain momentum. By packing the stands and cheering loudly, fans create an atmosphere that can motivate the home team to try harder.

Is the work culture optimistic about the new safety initiative, or is the process viewed as another "flavor of the month?" Do the workers trust management to give adequate support to a long-term intervention, or is this just another "quick fix" reaction that will soon be replaced by another "priority"?

Before helping a work team implement a new safety-improvement process, my partners at Safety Performance Solutions insist everyone in the work culture learn the principles underlying the process. Everyone in the culture needs to learn the rationale behind the safety process – even those who will not be involved in actual implementation. This helps to provide the right kind of atmosphere or cultural context to support the process.

Attitude of Leaders

The coach of an athletic team can make or break momentum. Coaches initiate and support momentum by helping both individuals and the team recognize their accomplishments. This starts with a clear statement of a vision and attainable goals. Then the leader enthusiastically holds individuals and the team accountable for achieving these goals.

A positive coach can even help members of a losing team feel better about themselves, and give momentum a chance. The key is to find pockets of excellence to acknowledge, which builds self-confidence and self-efficacy. Then specific corrective feedback will be accepted as key to being more successful, and to building more momentum.

In Conclusion

The momentum discussion reviewed many of the strategies presented in this *ISHN* series on encouraging more involvement in occupational safety. These principles are neither inclusive nor exclusive. In fact, most of these recommendations are interdependent, with some specifying procedures and others identifying attitudes, expectations, or perspectives that facilitate safety-related activities. Next month I'll add

seven more strategies to our list of 30 by considering theory and research from social psychology.

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