

How to Get More Involvement in Industrial Safety and Health: Ten Basic Strategies

The most efficient and effective way to prevent more workplace injuries is to get more people involved in procedures designed to improve occupational safety and health. This article and my *ISHN* contributions for the next three issues present ways to make this happen. All of the concepts and recommendations are founded on accepted psychological theory and empirical research rather than common sense. But the principles will appear intuitive because you've probably experienced their influence. More discussion of the strategies reviewed here can be found in my new book – *The Participation Factor* – published by the American Society of Safety Engineers. Let's start with the most basic strategy of all, and probably the most important – our language.

1. Watch Your Language

Words shape our feelings, expectancies, attitudes, and behaviors. We acknowledge the influence of words on behavior when we say things like, "Say that enough times and you'll start to believe it," "Can I talk you into doing me a favor?", and "Do as I say, not as I do."

Safety professionals commonly use words like "accident," "compliance," "regulation," "investigation," "occupant restraint," and "loss control." Such language certainly limits voluntary participation. Who wants to get involved in an "accident investigation" that seemingly attempts to find out who didn't "comply" with some safety "regulation" and therefore contributed to a "loss"? And who feels good about putting on an "occupant restraint" in order to comply with a corporate "mandate"?

2. Shift Safety from Priority to Value

Here's another change in language you need to consider. Calling safety the "Number 1 Priority" puts management in an awkward position. Employees know safety is not number one – profit is. If the company does not make money, there are no jobs, and there's no need for occupational safety. So stop putting safety in a position to compete with profit-making. Instead, give safety a separate and special category – value.

Human values don't change. They define a person's principles or personal standards, like honesty, democracy, courage, and freedom. Core values are never questioned – never compromised. They exist on a higher more noble plane than priorities. Our vision should be to make safety a value linked to every activity or priority in a work culture.

3. Take Advantage of the Competence Motive

Last August (2001), my *ISHN* column urged readers to stop talking about safety as if it's altruistic or self-sacrificing. This gives people an excuse for compromising safe operating procedures. "I just didn't have time to follow all of the precautions this time. I'll do that extra safety stuff next time when I'm not so stressed." This kind of commentary would be less likely if avoiding a safety-related procedure was considered incompetent.

People want to be judged competent. That's the competence motive. Thus, if safety is a value – inherent to every job – disregarding any relevant safety process means the job is done incorrectly. The operator is incompetent. Competence can only be improved through feedback, and several of my prior

ISHN contributions detailed procedures for delivering feedback effectively (e.g., see my Dec. 1993, July 1996, and Dec. 2001 articles).

4. Provide Behavior-Focused Feedback

Practice does not make perfect. Only with appropriate feedback can we improve. The key to improving performance through feedback is to be behavior-focused, both in diagnosing a problem and in suggesting ways to improve. Behavioral feedback is objective and impersonal. It merely displays a specific discrepancy between ideal and observed behavior. In addition, behavioral feedback can include specific directions on how to reduce a behavioral discrepancy.

In the workplace, competence-improving feedback can be delivered in three basic ways: 1) through one-on-one coaching; 2) through periodic performance appraisals (see my *ISHN* articles last Nov. and Dec. 2001); and 3) through group data graphs that display a work team's level of specific performance. Whatever the method for providing directional and/or motivational feedback, the context must be positive.

5. Make Feedback Conversations a Positive Experience

How do you feel when someone asks, "Can I give you some feedback?" Do you expect a positive exchange? Most people do not expect to enjoy a feedback session. Based on a lifetime of experience, people more often link feedback with "reprimand" than "praise." So don't expect people to naturally accept and look forward to receiving behavioral feedback.

The context of a feedback conversation is crucial. More specifically, the nature of the conversation or group discussion surrounding a feedback session will determine whether such a process will be appreciated, supported, and sustained. Therefore, the first feedback session needs to be predominantly positive and completely constructive. Realize that many people will not look forward to their initial feedback meeting because they expect to be corrected, perhaps even criticized.

6. Help People Feel Important

This fuel for *The Participation Factor* relates directly to the prior guideline. Negative feedback can degrade one's sense of importance, and that's disastrous for voluntary participation. That's why it's so important to emphasize a person's positive contributions to worthwhile work. When people believe their work is genuinely appreciated, they want to improve. When they become competent at a valuable job, their sense of personal importance increases. Thus, in the spirit of increasing their competence at a valuable work process, people will accept and apply relevant corrective feedback.

7. Progress Conversation from Past to Future to Present

As I discussed in my Feb. 2000 ISHN article, interpersonal conversation is a necessary support for safety – key to cultivating an interdependent culture in which people actively care for the safety and health of each other.

When we have opportunities to coach or offer advice to individuals or groups, we need to move the communication from past to future and then to the present. Conversations about past experiences are pleasant and functional.

They define mutual interests, attitudes, or experiences and enable recognition for prior accomplishments, thereby helping people feel important. But if you want productive change from a conversation, don't allow talk to get stuck in the past.

Whether addressing a team or conducting a performance appraisal, move your communication from the past to a consideration of future possibilities or ideal improvement. Then, after pondering aloud what could be, bring the talk back to the present. Discuss things that can be put into effect now to bring the ideal future a step closer. In other words, follow the next principle.

8. Set SMART Goals

A conversation about progress can lead to beneficial change if SMART goals are set. As I discussed in my ISHN article back in Sept. 1994, the letters of SMART represent the essential components of an effective goal – **S**pecific, **M**otivational, **A**ttainable, **R**elevant, and **T**rackable. Literally thousands of studies have demonstrated the power of SMART goals to improve performance at individual, group, organizational, and community levels. When goals are not SMART, they are ineffective. Thus, we set a poor example when we refer to goals that are not SMART. In safety this happens whenever we say “Zero injuries is our goal.” This is not SMART; it misuses and abuses goal setting.

9. Distinguish Goals from Purpose

Please talk about zero injuries as a purpose or vision. “An injury-free work culture” is the ultimate result of gaining and sustaining maximum employee involvement in safety-related activities. So your *purpose* is to reach and maintain zero injuries. Participation is needed for various process activities that contribute

to injury prevention and the attainment of a vision of “injury-free.” These process activities can be defined in terms of a certain number of specific actions that need to occur in a given period of time in order to be “successful.”

Thus, teach workers how to set SMART goals for *process* activities. These activities and their associated goals change continuously, but the vision of “zero injuries” remains the same. That’s what Dr. Edwards Deming meant when he referred to “constancy of purpose” as the first of his famous 14 points for the transformation of American industry to improved quality, productivity, and lower costs.

10. Use Process Measures of Safety Performance

Developing SMART goals and holding people accountable for achieving them implies you’re following this guideline for increasing employee involvement in occupational safety and health. Both the quantity and quality of participation in safety-related activities depend on the numbers you use to evaluate success or failure.

The bottom-line measure – total recordable injury rate (TRIR) – provides neither instructive guidance nor motivation to continue a particular safety process. It tells us nothing about why we’re succeeding or failing. Yet companies are frequently ranked according to their OSHA recordables and lost-time injuries. And within organizations, individuals or work teams frequently earn a financial bonus according to these outcomes. As I explained a decade ago in *ISHN* (Nov. 1992), this motivates employees to cover-up their injuries, and it stifles the very kinds of conversation needed to prevent injuries.

Instead, keep score on the various proactive things individuals and groups do for safety. For example, monitor the numbers of near hits, property damage incidents, and injuries reported. Track the number of corrective actions implemented and evaluated, the number of environmental and behavioral audits conducted, the number of environmental hazards eliminated, the number of safety suggestions and safety work orders submitted, and so on. Graph and post the percentage of individuals who participate in various safety-related activities, as well as the percentage of safe work environments and behaviors observed during systematic audits. This will give you an accountability system that can facilitate participation.

In Conclusion

This is the first of a four-part series addressing ways to get more people involved in efforts to prevent occupational injuries. The ten principles presented here are straightforward and relatively easy to put into effect. However, a significant barrier to following these guidelines is that they are actually contrary to traditional approaches to industrial safety. For example, it's common to define a certain reduction in injuries as a "safety goal", to "investigate accidents" as if there's a "root cause" from one person, to give more corrective than supportive feedback, to judge the safety performance of an organization or work team with outcome statistics rather than process metrics, and to give employees the safety mindset of working to avoid failure rather than working to achieve success.

Thus, while these ten guidelines for fueling the participation factor are basic and readily implemented, expect some resistance. Some resistance will be

unintentional and the result of bad habits. For example, most people accept the premise that “accident” is an inappropriate label for incidents we want to control. However, many of these same individuals continue to say “accident” out of habit instead of “injury” or “incident.”

Some resistance will be intentional, caused by disbelief or uncertainty that the suggested change is truly advantageous or worth the effort needed to make the change. Sometimes open discussion and consensus-building can overcome this barrier, but it often takes strategic planning to overcome such resistance. The guidelines I’ll offer next month will provide ideas for reducing resistance to change as well as increasing involvement in industrial safety and health.

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