

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

Last month I offered ten practical strategies for getting more involvement in safety-related activities. Most of those strategies reflected basic principles in behavior-based safety (BBS), such as developing process-focused goals and metrics, and making behavior-based feedback a positive experience.

Here I review strategies for fueling participation in health and safety that involve internal thinking, beliefs, or feeling states. They are not typically included in BBS training. We begin with three guidelines derived from social learning theory. They are critical for overcoming resistance to change and encouraging active involvement.

1. Elevate Self-Efficacy

“Believe in yourself, and you can achieve anything.” “Positive self-affirmations are the key to success.” “Prosperity begins with self-confidence.”

I’m sure you’ve heard quotes like these before. Each reflects a common theme among motivational speakers who convince audiences to believe in themselves. The academic label for this belief is “self-efficacy,” and it has been the topic of numerous research articles and theoretical proposals.

As I detailed in my *ISHN* column last May (2001), self-efficacy reflects a “can do” attitude. It refers to a person’s perception that he or she can organize and execute the procedures necessary to reach a certain goal. The **A**ttainable component of a SMART goal (as I reviewed in my *ISHN* column last month) reflects self-efficacy. It means those working to reach a certain goal or objective

believe they have sufficient knowledge, skills, and resources to accomplish the goal.

To assess whether self-efficacy is sufficient, ask the question – “Do you believe you can do this?” If the answer is “no”, then ask – “What would it take to convince you that you can attain the goal?”

2. Enhance Response-Efficacy

Response-efficacy refers to one’s belief that a certain technique or strategy will actually produce a desired outcome. It’s not enough to know what to do and have the confidence to do it. The participant must believe the effort will work.

The **Relevant** feature of SMART goals relates directly to response-efficacy. More specifically, goal-setting requires the belief that reaching the goal (for example, conducting 25 environmental or behavioral audits or giving behavior-based feedback in 10 one-on-one coaching sessions) will be instrumental in reducing injuries. In other words, participants with response-efficacy believe their assignment aligns with a particular mission statement.

3. Sell Outcome-Expectancy

A discussion of self- and response-efficacy connects logically with a consideration of outcome-expectancy. This is the **Motivational** component of SMART goals. Specifically, outcome-expectancy means the participant believes the completion of a given activity or the attainment of a certain goal will result in worthwhile consequences. In other words, the performer believes the effect of participating will be worth the effort.

This could be a most difficult challenge in getting more involvement in occupational safety. You could convince potential participants they can accomplish a particular safety process (self-efficacy) and that the process can prevent injuries (response-efficacy), but they might not participate because the consequence of reducing injuries beyond an already low occurrence rate doesn't seem important enough to justify the extra time and inconvenience. After all, in the absence of the new safety process, none of the potential participants have gotten seriously hurt.

Increasing outcome-expectancy for safety activities requires your best sales pitch. How should you approach this? Often safety professionals use group statistics like total recordable injury rate (TRIR) or total compensation costs to motivate more participation. Do workers walk around on the job thinking about lowering the company's TRIR? Can people relate to this outcome number? Of course not – it's too abstract; it's too remote. The outcome they *can* relate to is an individual statistic – a personal report of an injured employee they know. This implicates the next strategy for fueling participation.

4. Encourage Personal Testimonies

Personal testimonies provide a powerful image. Listeners can relate to an individual's story and put themselves in the same situation. Two kinds of testimonials can motivate participation in a safety process: a) a personal account of an injury that could have been prevented by a certain safety procedure, and b) an anecdote about someone who avoided an injury by using a particular technique or procedure.

Thus, the ultimate challenge is to get individuals to open up and speak frankly about their close calls and their actual injuries, including the specific behaviors that contributed to these mishaps. And they need to own up to things they could have done to prevent the incident. This leads to the next strategy for increasing participation in industrial safety and health.

5. Build Ownership and Interpersonal Trust

People will open up and speak frankly when they take part in developing the procedures and trust those in charge of the process are well-intentioned and capable of supporting the process over the long term. This is not profound; it's obvious. Yet many managers have a "command-and-control" mindset when it comes to occupational safety.

For many work cultures, the intrusive role of government in safety issues influences a disconnection between a company's safety and production missions. The result: a mindset that "we follow safety regulations for OSHA but manufacture a quality product for our company and our profits." The next two strategies help to build ownership in a safety process and trust in the intentions and abilities of those who need to support or carry out the process. This fuels the participation factor.

6. Teach Theory and Principles Before Procedures

When it comes to safety, many companies start with teaching step-by-step procedures (referred to as "training"). They don't educate people first about the principles or rationale behind a particular safety policy, program or process. As a result many safety programs are referred to as "flavor of the month." Such hand-

me-down programs usually attract less than desired involvement, and they don't last very long.

When people are educated about the principles and rationale behind a process, they can customize specific procedures for their own work areas. Then the relevance of the training process is obvious, and participation is enhanced. People are more likely to accept and follow procedures they helped to develop. They see such safe operating procedures as "the best way to do it" rather than "a policy we must obey because management says so."

7. Provide Guidance for Customizing a Process

This principle follows logically from the prior recommendation, but actually runs counter to common practice. So many safety efforts start as off-the-shelf programs. A videotape is shown and ready-made workbooks are followed to train step-by-step procedures. Much more involvement occurs when consultants begin a new safety effort by first teaching rationale and principles, and then guide participants through the development of specific procedures. Then people will want to be trained on *their* implementation procedures.

When effective leaders guide the customization of a process, they state expectations but they don't give mandates or directions. They show both confidence and uncertainty. In other words, as I explained in my ISHN article in Sept. 1999, effective leaders are confident a set of procedures will be developed but don't know the best way to do it. This allows employees room to be mindful, innovative, and self-motivated. The result: ownership and interpersonal trust increases, which in turn leads to more involvement.

8. Cultivate Self-Persuasion and Self-Accountability

Choice, ownership, and interpersonal trust contribute to the development of self-accountability – a critically important disposition for the maintenance of an injury-free workplace. When people work alone, with no one around to hold them accountable, they need to hold themselves accountable to follow the safe operating procedures. This often requires a significant amount of self-persuasion or self-discipline because the prescribed safe behavior is usually more inconvenient and inefficient than an at-risk alternative.

As I explained in my *ISHN* article last April (2001), research has shown that the more external justification a person feels for a certain activity, the less internal justification or self-accountability the individual develops. That's why severe threats and large incentives are often not the best motivators. While they might maintain safe work practices when the negative consequences for non-compliance or the positive consequences for compliance are available, they can do more harm than good when they are unavailable.

The principles discussed here for fueling the participation factor are especially powerful because they help to develop self-persuasion and self-accountability. The next principle relies on the kind of self-dialogue or mental scripting that builds self-accountability.

9. Use the Hypocrisy Effect

This technique is based on developing feelings of hypocrisy regarding a certain work practice, and is “ready-made” for applications to industrial safety. I detailed this intervention approach in my *ISHN* column in Oct. 2000. First, you

obtain a public commitment that participants will perform a designated safe behavior(s). Then you ask for a list of personal at-risk actions that are inconsistent with the safe behavior. This stirs up tension between words (the commitment) and deeds (prior behavior) which in turn increases self-persuasion and self-accountability to live up to the initial commitment.

Thus, by getting participants to experience hypocrisy (or feelings of inconsistency), they are more likely to perform the safe behavior when working alone in order to reduce tension caused by the perceived inconsistency between current commitment and past behavior. The need to be consistent in word and deed can have broad impact, as reflected in the final guidelines for fueling participation.

10. Teach and Promote Systems Thinking

When people choose to change their behavior, they adjust their attitudes and beliefs to be consistent with their actions. This change in attitude can influence more behavior change and then more attitude change – a spiraling, reciprocal interdependency between outward actions and inward feelings. This is how small changes in behavior and attitude can eventually lead to personal commitment and total involvement. As I explained in my *ISHN* article in May 1997, system thinkers understand this concept and participate in ways that are consistent with this viewpoint.

Systems thinking is consistent with the scholarship of such continuous improvement gurus as Stephen Covey, Edwards Deming, and Peter Senge. It can increase the quantity and improve the quality of people's involvement in all

aspects of occupational safety – from analyzing incidents to implementing corrective action plans. Such thinking helps people realize their importance in solving problems without fear of being blamed as a “root cause.” It advances understanding of factors outside and inside people that influence participation, and provides direction for benefiting self-persuasion and self-accountability.

In Conclusion

The ten guidelines reviewed here for enhancing involvement in occupational safety take us beyond overt behavior and into the covert or internal dynamics of people. We covered three basic belief states needed to fuel participation – self-efficacy, response-efficacy, and outcome-expectancy. Then I advocated the use of personal testimonies to develop these internal belief states, which established the need for a work culture in which employees perceive interpersonal trust and ownership with regard to their safety-related policies and procedures.

Feelings of ownership and interpersonal trust develop when employees are educated about theory and rationale before they are trained, and when they have opportunities to customize procedures for their work areas. Ownership and trust increase the development of self-accountability – a necessary internal state needed for the lone worker. Self-accountability is actually facilitated by following each of the guidelines discussed here, including techniques that promote systems thinking and arouse perceptions of hypocrisy.

By **E. Scott Geller**, Ph.D., professor of psychology, Virginia Tech, and senior partner with Safety Performance Solutions, a leading consulting/training

firm that helps organizations get more employees involved in achieving the vision of an injury-free workplace. For more information, call (540) 951-7233; email: safety@safetyperformance.com; or visit www.safetyperformance.com.