The Actively-Caring Disposition:
How can we ready a culture for interdependency?

If you want to lift yourself up,
Lift up someone else.

-Booker T. Washington

Last month my *ISHN* column introduced the theme of my new book, coauthored by Bob Veazie – *The Courage Factor: Leading people-based culture change*. I explained the value of developing courage and compassion in ourselves and others, and linked these leadership qualities to the actively-caring concept I've been talking and writing about for almost 20 years.

Courage and compassion are key to the actively caring needed to achieve and maintain an injury-free workplace. These people qualities are neither instinctual nor wired-in, but can be cultivated throughout a culture. Last month, I discussed the implementation of large-scale recognition and accountability systems to directly increase the frequency of actively-caring behavior. I also explained how authentic and appreciated recognition can benefit the dispositional person states that increase one's inclination to go beyond the call of duty on behalf of the safety and health of others.

The Five Actively-Caring Person States

In January 1993, my *ISHN* article introduced five person states that impact the likelihood an individual will actively care for the safety of themselves and others. Since that time my SPS partners and I have helped various organizations develop these dispositional factors throughout their culture. Let's define these person states, and entertain ways to augment them.

Self-Esteem ("I am valuable")

How do you feel about yourself? Research has shown that people with high self-esteem report fewer negative emotions, and less depression than those with low self-esteem, and they

handle life's stressors with more confidence and competence. Most importantly, the better we feel about ourselves, the more willing we are to actively care for the welfare of others.

Actually, common sense tells us people will not act to protect others from personal injury if they do not perceive themselves as being a worthwhile individual. Our common sense also informs us of ways to increase our own and others' self-esteem. Consider, for example, the following A-words that reflect certain types of interpersonal conversations that can boost a person's self-esteem: Accept, Actively listen, Agree, Appreciate, Acknowledge, Approve, Ask, Attend, Avoid criticizing, and Argue less.

Self-Efficacy ("I can do it")

Self-efficacy is more situational specific than self-esteem, and refers to a person's sense of competence at a particular task. Thus, job-specific feedback directly impacts self-efficacy. When individuals believe they are doing worthwhile work well, their self-efficacy increases, along with their willingness to actively care.

Here we're talking about personal experiences that enable a person to see their achievements. Sometimes these success stories occur naturally, as when the artist, scholar, and tradesman view the positive results of their ongoing behavior. We call this "intrinsic reinforcement." Effective safety leaders point out the inherent positive consequences of a group's injury-prevention efforts, thereby increasing the self-efficacy of the participants.

Personal Control ("I'm in control")

The academic term "locus of control" refers to a general outlook regarding the location of forces controlling a person's life – internal vs. external. The internal outlook reflects belief in direct personal control over a certain situation, as opposed to the external belief in chance, luck,

or uncontrollable fate. In the internal state, individuals are captains of their ship, whereas in the external state, people believe they are victims of circumstances beyond their control.

The perception of "choice" is closely related to belief in personal control. In other words, whenever you increase one's perception of choice (for example, by offering options rather than mandates), you enhance the perception of control, ownership, and self-directed commitment. Each of these person states contribute to an actively-caring disposition.

Optimism ("I expect the best")

Optimism refers to the learned expectation that life events will turn out well. People who expect the best benefit from the self-fulfilling prophecy. They start with an expectation of success, and then work diligently to make that positive outcome happen. In contrast, a pessimistic prophecy can depreciate a person's perception of personal control, self-efficacy, and even self-esteem.

Empirical research has demonstrated increases in both optimism and helping behavior following such simple events as finding money in a coin return, accepting a cookie, listening to soothing music, being on a winning football team, and receiving genuine behavior-based recognition. Bottom line: People are more likely to actively care when they are in a good mood and optimistic about the future.

Belongingness ("We are family")

We don't hesitate to ask members of our intermediate family to stop an at-risk behavior or perform a certain safe behavior. This does not take courage; it's an obligation, and compassion comes naturally.

However, intervening on behalf of a stranger's safety takes moral courage. For example, giving corrective feedback to an unknown person regarding his or her at-risk behavior could

result in an unpleasant, uncomfortable, or embarrassing confrontation. In fact, the lower the

relatedness between an observer and the performer of at-risk behavior, the more courage it takes

to intervene.

Some work teams are extremely cohesive and consider themselves members of a

"corporate family." These individuals are not only willing to give and receive corrective

feedback regarding at-risk behavior; they expect their teammates to actively care for their safety.

These workers are "Brothers-Sisters Keepers."

How can a sense of belongingness or interdependence be cultivated in a corporate

culture? I've heard a variety of proposals from discussion groups, including: 1) Increase team-

building exercises, group goal-setting and feedback sessions, self-managed or self-directed work

teams and group celebrations for process and outcome achievements; 2) Decrease the frequency

of top-down directions and "quick-fix" programs; 3) Teach relationship-building communication

strategies throughout the workforce, especially to the first-line supervisors.

When resources, opportunities, and talents enable team members to assert, "We can make

a difference," feelings of belongingness occur naturally. This leads to synergy, with the group

achieving far more than possible from individuals working independently. More importantly, the

interdependent attitudes, behavior, and achievements strengthen a family-oriented culture

wherein actively caring for safety is a welcomed obligation.

In Conclusion

There are obviously numerous ways to cultivate the actively-caring disposition

throughout a corporate culture. I've heard numerous recommendations from the field, but could

offer only a select few here. I suggest you solicit suggestions from your work teams.

Specifically, after briefly defining the five actively-caring person states, ask people three

questions per each dispositional factor: 1) what policies, communications, and management systems *decrease* this particular person state? 2) What policies, communications, and management systems *increase* this person state? 3) What could be done around here to enhance this person state in you and others?

Searching for ways to increase an actively-caring disposition throughout your work culture will take significant time and require compassionate courage. Subsequently, implementing the practical suggestions will be even more time-consuming. But the resulting interdependent and injury-free workplace will be well worth the effort.

Also, consider the beneficial difference your own actively-caring behavior could make. You set the right example for your culture, and your helping behavior will lift your own person states and contribute to an actively-caring disposition.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Alumni Distinguished Professor, Virginia Tech
Senior Partner, Safety Performance Solutions