

**Finding Your “Voice”:  
*Is safety leadership your calling?***

Last month my *ISHN* contribution contrasted paradigms of the “Industrial Age” versus the “Age of the Knowledge Worker”. Stephen Covey refers to the former as the “Age of Control” whereby manual workers are expected to follow the rules and standards defined by top management. Workers do physical labor, but leave their minds at the door. They become institutionalized to speak to their supervisors only when spoken to. They essentially lose their “voice”.

The global competition of today’s business world requires people to work smarter. For this to happen, corporate decision makers need more input from their employees. For safety performance to improve beyond current plateaus, hourly workers need to provide more advice, involvement, and interpersonal accountability. In other words, we need hourly workers – once silenced by the top-down control paradigm – to become knowledge workers and speak up. They need to find their “voice,” and use it to benefit their workplace.

My *ISHN* contribution last month affirmed the value of certain leadership qualities for enabling employees to offer safety-related advice and increase engagement in safety processes. In particular, I claimed the humble and trustworthy leader is likely to profit from the knowledge worker. This month I add to this perspective by defining what it means to find your “voice”.

**Finding Your Voice**

Over the years, university students have frequently asked me, “How should I decide what major course of study to pursue?” Then during their senior year many ask, “How can I know what career goals to strive for?”

My first answer to their questions has consistently been, “Find a fit between function and talent, and find your voice.” I use “find your voice” as a metaphor to express the need to seek

compatibility between tasks (as in a job assignment) and personal interests, natural talents, and learned skills.

Sometimes I relate the personal story of when I turned down my candidacy to become Head of the Virginia Tech Department of Psychology in 1980. I was considering the advantages of such a promotion, including a large salary increase and greater control over departmental business, when an esteemed colleague entered my office and asserted, “Don’t do it. You are a researcher and a teacher, not an administrator.”

I followed the profound advice of my friend and colleague who had served as Head of the Psychology Department at Carnegie Mellon for 15 years. He knew my “voice” better than I did at the time.

Today I know my “voice” better, and am so grateful I listened to my wise colleague. Through much reflection on life experiences, I’ve increased my appreciation for this “find your voice” metaphor. Stephen Covey’s latest book, *The 8<sup>th</sup> Habit: From effectiveness to greatness* has added substantially to this realization.

### **The 8<sup>th</sup> Habit**

Most readers are familiar with Dr. Covey’s first bestseller, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Indeed, several safety consultants have incorporated the seven “habits” into their training and consultations. A few, including myself, have given keynote addresses and professional development workshops with titles like *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Safety Leaders*. My *ISHN* article in February 1994, entitled *Habits of Effective Safety Pros*, related the seven principles described by Dr. Covey to the challenge of keeping people safe. Now let’s explore the safety relevance of Covey’s 8<sup>th</sup> habit.

As you have probably gathered from the preceding discussion, the 8<sup>th</sup> habit proposed by Dr. Covey is “Find your voice and inspire others to find theirs” (p. 270). According to Covey, helping people find their voice is a primary mission of leadership. The leader who convinced me 27 years ago to withdraw my name from department-head consideration not only convinced me my voice was not in administration, he also called special attention to my accomplishments that implied talents and skills for teaching, research, and scholarship.

### **Talent vs. Skill**

Is there a difference between talent and skill? *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1985) does not make a clear distinction, defining talent as “a mental or physical aptitude; natural or acquired ability” (p. 1240) and skill as “proficiency, ability, or dexterity” (p. 1146).

However, Covey maintains talent to be one’s natural gifts and strengths, whereas skills are learned or acquired. Talents require skills, but people can apply their knowledge and skills in areas where their talents do not fit. Then people go through the motions with competence, but it takes external accountability systems to keep them going.

I have a hard-working colleague, for example, who has superb knowledge and research skills relevant to each university course he teaches. However, he is not a talented teacher. He prepares well for each class but does not connect theory and concepts to student-relevant examples, and he does not activate critical thinking nor engage the students in interactive discussion. Clearly, teaching is not this individual’s “voice”, rather his “voice” is in research and administration.

### **Four Aspects of “Voice”**

Covey claims a person’s voice “lies at the nexus of *talent* (your natural gifts and strengths), *passion* (those things that naturally energize, excite, motivate, and inspire you), *need*

(including what the world needs enough to pay you for), and *conscience* (that still, small voice within that assures you of what is right and that prompts you to actually do it)” (p. 84-85).

Dr. Covey links the italicized words in the above quote to the four dimensions of the whole person—mind (for talent), heart (for passion), body (for needs), and spirit (for conscience). Let’s explore these four aspects of people as they relate to the life of a safety professional.

### **A Special “Voice” for Safety**

The challenges of safety promotion and injury prevention require unique skill, **talent**, and **passion**. But the foundation of this special calling is *service*. However, such service is not always appreciated by those served, and the financial remuneration to cover your **heels** is rarely equitable. The typical safety professional encounters many employees who earn more money than they do, yet work less diligently and put in fewer hours.

In addition, safety professionals accomplish their daily tasks with less-than-adequate resources. Often their requests for materials and/or personnel support are seemingly ignored. Many don’t dare ask for financial aid and time off to attend a professional development conference.

Why is safety and those who work for injury prevention treated this way? Because the benefits of safety efforts are not readily visible. Regardless of the degree of attention to safety, injuries are relatively rare. And, often it takes a serious injury or fatality to get corporate leadership to evaluate their safety policies, programs, and processes.

So what keeps the safety professional going under these trying circumstances? Where is their “voice”? Clearly, the challenge of safety leadership is not for everyone. Besides certain knowledge, skills, and talents, safety leadership requires a high level of emotional intelligence—the ability to delay immediate gratification for delayed and potentially greater rewards.

And, what is this reward? You know—the prevention of an injury or fatality. But how do we observe this benefit of safety and reap proper recognition and appreciation? That’s the problem, and the reason safety professionals are among the unsung and under-compensated heroes of our society.

Thus, very special people pursue the challenge of safety leadership—people who find their “voice” in serving others, but don’t need soon, certain, and positive consequences to affirm their value. Their **passion** to help others is supported by **spiritual** intelligence—that still, small voice within that transforms passion into compassion and says, “I might be sacrificing but I know I’m doing right because I’m serving others.” If you find your “voice” here, you are a special person.

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

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply research-based knowledge toward improving leadership for safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller’s new book: *People-Based Safety: The Source*, as well as five video/CD/DVD programs, accompanied by relevant workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please log on to [www.people-based-safety.com](http://www.people-based-safety.com) or call SPS at 540-951-7233.