

Making Safety Feedback More Effective

The ABC model of behavior change reflects the basic principle that behavior (B) is directed by activators (A) and motivated by consequences (C). In other words, stimuli or events in our environment that precede our actions often direct us to perform in certain ways, but we do what we do because of the consequences we expect to receive or avoid as a result. Thus, activators are most apt to influence the *quality* of our performance (how we do things), whereas consequences usually influence the *quantity* of our performance (how often we do things). This basic principle of behavioral science has certain implications for using interpersonal feedback to improve safety. I will explain this here, as well as provide guidelines for improving your delivery of interpersonal feedback in order to increase its beneficial impact.

Activator or Consequence?

In his 1995 book (“Bringing out the best in people”), Aubrey Daniels defines feedback as an activator -- communication that precedes behavior in order to direct it. In contrast, most discussions of performance feedback in the research literature depict situations in which feedback events follow behavior. And, in my recent book (“The psychology of safety”), interpersonal feedback (as in safety coaching) is presented as a behavioral consequence. Which perspective is correct?

It turns out, feedback can be considered an activator or consequence, depending on whether it directs or motivates behavior. And, depending upon your desire to direct or motivate behavior with interpersonal communication, you should deliver feedback as an activator or a consequence, respectively. Thus, direction or instruction regarding the quality of a behavior is usually most effective when given immediately before an individual has an opportunity to perform the target behavior. On the other hand, when feedback is used to increase or decrease

the quantity of a behavior, it's best to give that feedback immediately following the behavior you want to influence.

Four Kinds of Feedback

Given that feedback can be positive or negative and can be used to influence the quality or quantity of performance, there are four basic kinds of interpersonal feedback. Let's illustrate these four approaches as they relate to safety management. When safety coaches want to motivate the frequency of a particular behavior, they should attempt to deliver appropriate feedback immediately after the target behavior. Safe behavior is followed by positive feedback (or praise) to support that behavior and increase the likelihood it will occur again. And, at-risk behavior should be followed immediately with negative feedback in an attempt to stop the behavior and reduce its probability of reoccurrence.

Stopping vs. correcting behavior. When safety coaches see an unsafe behavior, they should usually do more than attempt to stop the behavior. They should provide specific direction for improving the behavior in order to make it safer. When should this corrective feedback be given?

Often, it's most convenient to give corrective feedback in conjunction with a request to stop a particular at-risk behavior. This shows that safety coaching is about caring for an individual's safety, and not about catching mistakes. However, since direction for changing behavior is most influential when it occur immediately prior to an opportunity to perform the behavior, safety coaches need to find ways to make their corrective feedback an effective activator, as well as a de-motivating consequence. Thus, the most effective safety coaches take note of corrective action needed to make a certain behavior safer; and when an occasion arises for that behavior to occur again, the safety coach offers caring instruction.

Brief or infrequent behavior. Sometimes at-risk behaviors begin and end too quickly for an observer to stop it. For example, you might observe a coworker twisting while lifting a heavy object, running down steps without holding the handrail, or driving a forklift truck without using a safety belt or turn signal. When should you give corrective feedback under these circumstances (when you're too late to stop the at-risk behavior)? You might not be able to stop some at-risk behavior, but proper corrective feedback can help prevent it from occurring again. Obviously, if a situation calls for a sequence of at-risk behaviors, corrective feedback following one behavior will serve as an activator for the next behavior. But, if the opportunity for another at-risk behavior is delayed, feedback will have more corrective influence if given later as an activator preceding an opportunity to be safe or at-risk. And delaying such correction will be less embarrassing for the performer. In such situations, it's not necessary for the safety coach to tell the person about the prior at-risk observation, but rather to remind the person to perform the upcoming behavior in a safe manner. Then, statements like "Remember to avoid twisting," "Don't forget to use the handrail," and "I'm sure you'll buckle-up and use your turn signal" come across as friendly and caring reminders rather than "gotcha" indictments.

It's in the Delivery

I hope it's clear that giving interpersonal feedback at the right time can certainly increase its beneficial impact. Actually, timing is one of four basic guidelines I recommend you consider when planning feedback strategies. These rules of feedback delivery can be readily remembered with the key words -- Specific, On time, Appropriate, and Real -- whose first letters spell "soar." So, by following these four basic rules, you can "soar" to success with interpersonal feedback.

Specific. Whether serving as an activator or consequence, safety feedback needs to focus on specific behavior. As a consequence (or motivation), feedback specifies what at-risk

behavior to stop and what safe behavior to keep performing. And as an activator (or directive), feedback reminds an individual to perform a particular task in a certain way. Such feedback needs to be given with straightforward and objective words.

Ambiguous and subjective language about internal person states are not useful, and can be counterproductive. For example, evaluative statements like “It seems you’re careless, lazy, unenthusiastic, unaware, disorganized, or out-of-touch” will only add resentment and lessen the acceptability of the behavioral message. And, when you give positive statements watch for the use of “but.” Rather than giving pure praise or appreciation, we often feel obligated to add a negative (or corrective feedback) statement to balance the communication. Such mixed messages can weaken your impact. Some people will hear only the positive; some will hear only the negative; and others will discount both messages -- figuring the net gain of one positive and one negative is no communication.

So it’s often best to make your specific behavior-focused feedback “short and sweet.” Rather than combining both positive and negative feedback in one exchange or overloading a person with several behaviors to continue or change, focus your advice on one area of performance. It’s much better to give people brief and specific feedback messages over weeks or months, than to give people fewer but longer feedback sessions with mixed and potentially confusing motivators and directives.

On time. As discussed above, motivational feedback to increase or decrease behavior should follow the target behavior as soon as possible. On the other hand, when the purpose of behavioral feedback is to shape the quality of a response, it often makes most sense to give such directive feedback as an activator (proceeding the next opportunity to perform the target behavior).

Receiving feedback about errors as a consequence can be perceived as punishing and frustrating, if an opportunity to correct the observed errors is not available in the near future. When the person eventually receives an opportunity to correct the behavior, the advice might be forgotten. By giving corrective feedback as close as possible to the next opportunity for the behavior to reoccur, you are increasing its directive influence and reducing the potential of negative affect resulting from catching a person making a mistake.

Appropriate. Specific and well-timed feedback needs to be appropriate for the needs, abilities, and expectations of the person receiving feedback. Simply put, the feedback should fit the situation. This means the feedback should be expressed in language the performer can understand and appreciate, and it should be customized for the performer's abilities at the particular task. When people are learning a task, directive feedback needs to be detailed and perhaps accompanied with a behavioral demonstration. In such learning situations, it's important to match the advice with the performer's achievement level. Don't expect too much, and thus give more advice than the individual can grasp in one feedback session.

Often at-risk behavior is performed by experienced workers who know how to do the job safely, but they have developed at-risk habits or are just taking a risky short-cut. It could be insulting and demeaning to give these individuals detailed instructions about the safe way to complete their job. In these situations, it's appropriate to give brief corrective feedback as a reminder to be safe and set the right example for others.

Consequently, it's important for the safety coach to size up the situation, and make specific and timely feedback fit the occasion. This is not easy, and requires up-to-date knowledge of the performer's abilities with regard to a certain task. It also requires specific knowledge regarding the safe and at-risk ways of performing the task. This is a prime reason

why the most effective safety coaching usually occurs between coworkers on the same work team.

Real. Another reason interpersonal coaching is most effective when occurring between team members, is because such feedback is often perceived as most genuine and caring. Feedback will be ineffective if it is viewed as a way of exerting top-down control, or demonstrating superior knowledge or motivation. The only reason for giving safety feedback is to reduce personal injury.

Although well-intentioned, the discipline policies in some organizations make it difficult for some people to view interpersonal safety feedback as purely caring and corrective. The “gotcha” perspective associated with safety often interferes with a manager’s sincere attempt to correct at-risk behavior. Thus, corrective feedback is often perceived as most genuine or “real” when it occurs between coworkers on the same work team. These individuals know most about the situation and the person, and thus have sufficient information and opportunity to make the feedback specific, on time, appropriate, and real.

In Conclusion

I have reviewed key guidelines for delivering effective feedback. In this regard the work “SOAR” is useful to remember, because each letter of this word starts a key word which implicates a rule for effective feedback delivery -- **S**pecific, **O**n time, **A**ppropriate, and **R**eal. These four words reflect the special value in work-team members giving each other safety feedback. This is the case, because usually coworkers have the most complete knowledge of the person and the situation. Therefore, they are best able to make their feedback a) specific in terms of behavior to continue or stop, b) appropriate for the expectations, abilities, and experiences of the performers, and c) reflect real concern for the individual’s health and safety.

Coworkers in a work team are also most likely to be on time with safety feedback, whether the feedback serves as an activator, motivator, or both. When using feedback to support safe behavior or stop at-risk behavior, “on time” means the feedback should be delivered as a consequence which follows as soon after the observed behavior as possible. In contrast, when using feedback to encourage safe behavior (perhaps as a correction for at-risk behavior observed earlier), it is often most effective to use feedback as an activator. That is, you should wait for a situation that calls for the particular safe behavior and then offer a specific, appropriate, and genuine reminder. Thus, the right interpersonal feedback will enable you to “soar” to new heights in safety excellence.

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Note: Dr. Geller teaches feedback strategies during his dynamic two-day seminar series on “Achieving a Total Safety Culture”. For more information, call Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-SAFE (7233).