

Our Need for Competence Fuels Safety Participation

Do you assume people will not want to participate in your safety process? Why, because it's inconvenient or time consuming? Do you assume that safety participation represents altruistic or sacrificial behavior, meaning it goes beyond self-interest? Why, because the obvious consequences are rewards for other people and inconvenience for the participant?

I'd like you to consider an alternative perspective. I propose that people really want to participate -- to play a role in keeping people safe. Consider that the opposite of active participation is incompetence, apathy, or helplessness. No one wants to be in those states.

Furthermore, I propose that we stop talking about participation in a safety process as if it requires personal sacrifice -- as if such behavior requires a relinquishing of personal gain so others might benefit. How many people can get excited about enduring negative consequences so others in the workplace might receive positive consequences?

Instead, let's assume that helping others reaps personal gains for *everyone* involved. Such behavior is not sacrificial nor even unselfish. It rewards a basic human need to make a difference -- to serve others. In other words, serving others is self-rewarding not self-sacrificing.

The Need for Competence

Several researchers of human motivation have proposed that people naturally enjoy being able to solve problems and successfully complete worthwhile tasks. In other words, we are motivated to learn, to explore possibilities, to understand what is

going on, and to participate in achieving worthwhile goals. The label for this fundamental human motive is “competence.”

Motivational psychologists assume that the desire for competence is self-initiating and self-rewarding. In other words, behavior that increases feelings of effectiveness is self-directed and does not need extrinsic reinforcement to keep it going. Furthermore, behavioral skills that increase competence are readily learned and practiced. What does this mean for safety leadership and participation?

The Need for Self-Efficacy

Last May, my *ISHN* article introduced self-efficacy and my next *ISHN* article (June, 2001) focused on the use of this concept in designing effective fear appeals. Here again the belief in self-efficacy is critical. In fact, self-efficacy implies competence. Having self-efficacy means the participant believes s/he can organize and perform the procedures needed to achieve a desired goal. When people learn specific procedural steps for carrying out a particular safety process, they gain self-efficacy. They feel competent.

The Need for Response-Efficacy

My May and June *ISHN* articles indicated that self-efficacy is not sufficient to motivate participation. It's not enough to feel competent at a task, we need to believe our participation contributes to making a beneficial difference. Thus, effective training not only teaches step-by-step procedures, it includes a rationale for why the process is useful.

In safety, this translates to convincing the participants that applying the lessons learned will help people remain injury-free. Thus, the need to feel competent is satisfied

by self-efficacy (believing one has the skills to implement a particular intervention) and response-efficacy (believing the intervention will have desirable impact).

The Power of Feedback

So how do we know we are competent at something? How do we know our competence makes a valuable difference? You know the answer -- feedback.

Feedback about our ongoing behavior tells us how we are doing and enables us to do better. We hone our skills through practice and behavior-based feedback. Sometimes this process feedback comes naturally, like when we see our behavior produce a desired result. But, often behavioral feedback requires careful and systematic observation by another individual -- a trainer or coach -- who later communicates his or her findings to the performer. In each case, feedback enables the development of self-efficacy and fulfillment of the need for competence.

Outcome feedback supports the need for competence further by showing desirable effects of participation. For example, a display of the percentage of safe behaviors among a work group indicates whether an interpersonal coaching process is working. When these percentages are graphed daily or weekly, a work team can track their progress at improving their coaching competence.

Objective evidence of a reduction in injuries, property damage, or “near miss” reports is, of course, the most rewarding feedback we can get in safety. This is the ultimate outcome feedback we work to achieve. Unfortunately, this feedback does not change rapidly enough to inform our competence. Also, this feedback can be invalid due to under-reporting. That’s why we need ongoing behavior-based feedback to continuously build our self- and response-efficacy, and satisfy our need for competence.

I've discussed various ways to deliver and receive individual and group feedback in prior *ISHN* articles (see, for example, Feb. 2000, May 1999, Dec. 1996, Aug. 1996, and July 1996). Here I only want to drive home the point that feedback is essential to fulfill a basic human need – the need for competence.

I've heard some behavior-based safety consultants argue that feedback is not a reinforcer. Technically, a reinforcer is a behavioral consequence that increases the frequency of the behavior it follows. So, if behavior does not improve after feedback then the feedback was not a reinforcer. Likewise, praise, reprimands, bonus pay, or frequent flyer points are not reinforcers when they don't increase the frequency of the behavior they target; and they often don't.

Consider, however, that feedback delivered well, whether supportive, corrective or both, feeds the basic human desire to be competent. It's not a payoff for doing the right thing. Rather, it's objective information a person uses to feel competent or to learn how to become more competent. I believe there's no other consequence with greater potential to improve performance and thereby become a reinforcer.

In Conclusion

This article calls for a paradigm shift -- a change in perspective about participation in safety efforts. Instead of calling on guilt or sacrifice to get people involved in procedures to eliminate hazards or decrease at-risk behavior, I suggest we assume that people are naturally motivated to make beneficial differences. People hate feeling incompetent or helpless. They want to learn, to discover, to become more proficient at worthwhile tasks. People want opportunities to ask questions, to study

pertinent material, to work with people who know more than they, and to receive feedback that can increase their competence.

Thus, participation in a safety-related process is not a thankless job requiring self-sacrifice or a special degree of altruism. Safety participation puts people in control of environmental and human factors that can cause serious injury or death. Safety participation avoids one of the most aversive human states -- the feeling of incompetence or helplessness. Participation in an effective safety process provides opportunities to satisfy a basic human need -- the need for competence. And, the effective and frequent delivery of behavior-based feedback provides a mechanism for improving the quality of safety participation, as well as cultivating feelings of competence throughout a work culture.

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