People-Based Safety

Improving employees' attitudes & organizational culture

By Joshua H. Williams

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, THE PLANT MANAGER of a major steel manufacturing facility in the southeastern U.S. requested an assessment of his company's safety culture. Employees claimed they were punished frequently, excessively and inconsistently. They also said the leadership team overlooked safety hazards; safety training was practically nonexistent; safety shortcuts were encouraged when production pressure was high; communication between organizational levels was infrequent and sometimes hostile; and that there was no sense of long-term job security for hourly employees. These people were angry, scared and unhappy. When informed about this condition, he responsed, "So what?!" This leader simply did not believe (nor want to believe) that employees' attitudes affect what they do on the job for safety.

When employees' attitudes are favorable, employees follow safe procedures, report and fix (when possible) safety hazards, participate in safety initiatives, warn coworkers about safety hazards and risky behaviors, and teach and model safe work practices for newer employees. When employees are scared, angry, and/or apathetic on the job, they hide injuries, take shortcuts, resist safety improvement efforts and quit providing safety feedback to others (Geller and Williams).

When leaders understand and positively influence employees' attitudes, along with behaviors and environment factors, morale is high, safety records are strong, communication is open and frequent, and mutual respect pervades the culture [Geller(b)]. This is the essence of people-based safety.

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This article highlights 10 key people-based factors that can positively influence employees' attitudes. It also provides a People-Based Factors Inventory (PFI) survey (Figure 1), which is designed to assess one's current score on these 10 factors. Higher PFI scores reflect more favorable responses and overall scores may change as people-based factors are influenced. (Developed by the author, this survey will be used in the future to assess the impact of employees' people-based factors on safety performance; upon its validation, empirical findings from the PFI will be made available.)

Employees' Attitudes

One person's bad attitude can infect the entire safety culture, may last for years and spread to other employees (Yanna). One useful way to think about attitudes is to use a three-category model (adapted from Yanna): complainers, spectators and champions. However, since attitudes change as a result of interactions with others, it is possible that a champion may have been a complainer in the past.

•**Complainers** usually voice safety concerns to express displeasure, not to make improvements. They regularly find fault with the organization and others. Complainers typically believe that other people are responsible for their problems; that change is inherently bad; and that people do not have control over their own lives. This leads to feelings of anger, resentment, doubt, frustration and fear.

•**Spectators** rarely discuss safety concerns since they perceive that their actions will have little or no consequence on the organization or work team. As a result, they seldom participate in safety efforts. Spectators typically believe that others will solve important problems; that change is unnecessary; that most situations are "no big deal"; and that people have minimal control over their lives. As a result, they often feel uninspired, detached, unemotional and indifferent.

•**Champions** express safety concerns construc-

tively and work effectively with others to make improvements. They have a positive outlook toward coworkers and the organization as a whole. Champions believe that problems create opportunities for change; that change is a sign of growth; and that people control their own lives. This leads to feelings of confidence, happiness, contentment, personal control and optimism.

To positively influence others, effective safety leaders:

•teach and demonstrate respect, even when it's not reciprocated;

•acknowledge past organizational mistakes and look optimistically to the future to make improvements;

•treat mistakes as learning opportunities, not occasions to punish;

•solicit input from workers about safety concerns and respond to these concerns in a timely manner;

•create opportunities for employees to get involved in safety initiatives;

•encourage discussions between and within organizational levels;

•increase the frequency and quality of one-on-one conversations (Geller and Williams).

Influencing these factors in others within the organization helps move them from being complainers to becoming champions.

Table 1

Communication Style Categories

Communication Style	Strengths	Weaknesses
Sheriff	practical, decisive, action-oriented, assertive, big-picture focus	combative, insensitive, domineering, impatient
Diplomat	patient, supportive, nonthreatening, inclusive, sensitive	avoids conflict, withholds true feelings, passive, indecisive
Investigator	detail-oriented, analytical, logical, prepared	micromanaging, inflexible, loses "forest for the trees"

Source: Adapted from Poertner and Miller, 1996.

10 People-Based Factors That Influence Attitudes

Ten person-based factors influence employees' attitudes. Improvements in these factors (which are subject to change) lead to better attitudes among employees, increasing buy-in and commitment to safety improvement efforts.

Factor 1: Communication

Workplace attitudes are influenced by employees' interpersonal communication. Employees with effective communication skills are better able to constructively express their concerns, relate to coworkers and achieve their work goals compared to those with poor communication skills (Poertner and Miller). This directly impacts employees' attitudes and morale.

Unfortunately, communication between employees (across and within organizational levels) is often strained, confrontational or nonexistent. These problems may be caused by incompatible communication styles. Employees can be classified into one of three communication style categories (adapted from Poertner and Miller:

•**Sheriffs** are task-oriented. Their strengths include being decisive, direct, practical and closure-oriented. However, they are often impatient, overly independent, combative, insensitive and domineering.

•**Diplomats** are supportive and patient. Their strengths include being consistent, easy going, responsive to others and effective listeners. However, they are typically passive, indecisive, slow to change and wary of confrontation.

•**Investigators** are analytical and detail-oriented. They are generally prepared, systematic and accurate. However, they can also be inflexible, overly cautious, insensitive, excessively critical and may have unrealistic standards.

Most people have adapted elements from all three categories into their own communication style, although most have a dominant style that fits into one of these categories. Intolerance of different communication styles may create conflict, which can lead to poor attitudes. For example, the decisive, task-oriented sheriff might get impatient with the slow-to-change diplomat, instead of acknowledging his/her patience and support. Or, the sensitive and patient diplomat may have trouble understanding the detail-oriented, micromanaging investigator.

To help improve employees' communication skills, effective safety leaders teach the following techniques:

•Recognize the limitations of your dominant communication style.

•Accept the communication styles of others.

•Use different communication styles in different situations.

•Match the communication style with the context or interpersonal situation.

•Develop a pattern of communication that incorporates the strengths of all three styles.

Overall, effective communication skills are key to influencing employees' attitudes in positive directions. Effective communicators provide frequent, high-quality recognition to coworkers, deliver nonthreatening corrective feedback when warranted, and actively listen to and empathize with others.

Factor 2: Locus of Control

One of the strongest predictors of human behavior is locus of control—"the extent to which individuals believe that they, or that external factors, control

their lives" (Rotter 34). Research demonstrates that people with an internal locus of control have higher academic achievement, better responsiveness to psychotherapy and are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors than individuals with an external locus of control (Lefton). Employees who feel "in control" of safety issues and initiatives are more likely to buy-in and participate in the company's safety efforts [Geller(a)]. Therefore, safety leaders should empower employees to manage safety initiatives. This leads to more effective safety programs and improved employee attitudes.

Self-efficacy for safety is largely determined by the manner in which organizational safety leaders motivate employees.

Factor 3: Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a widely studied person factor. It reflects a person's self-confidence in completing a certain task, especially in the face of significant obstacles (Bandura). Employees with high self-efficacy on the job feel competent and effective, which leads to more positive, healthy attitudes on the job. Self-efficacy for safety is largely determined by the manner in which organizational safety leaders motivate employees. Excessive command-and-control mandates and highly punitive motivational tactics diminish self-esteem and decrease self-efficacy to actively participate in improving safety. Conversely, personal and positive recognition for proactive safety efforts improves self-efficacy because it reinforces one's sense of ability and accomplishment [Geller(b)]. This facilitates champion attitudes throughout the organization.

Factor 4: Optimism

Optimism reflects the degree to which an individual's expectations for the future are positive and that life is generally good. Optimism not only affects an individual's mood state, it predicts performance. In a study of college freshmen at the University of Pennsylvania, students' optimism (measured before the start of school) was a better predictor of academic success than SAT scores or high-school grades (Seligman).

To improve employees' sense of optimism, a company should reward participation in safety efforts [Geller(b)]. In one case, a company gave embroidered golf shirts to employees who were especially active in the organization's behavioral observation and feedback process. Recipients saw the shirts as a legitimate "thank you" for their efforts, instead of as a "payoff" sometimes associated with reactive incentive programs. Genuine appreciation facilitates optimism because employees believe: a) they are appreciated; b) they will be recognized in the future; and c) the company cares about their safety efforts (Geller and Williams). This will likely reduce the number of complainer attitudes within the organization.

Factor 5: Self-Esteem

Self-esteem reflects the extent to which employees feel valued and appreciated. The manner in which organizations manage employees (i.e., carrot vs. stick) greatly impacts employees' self-esteem [Geller(b)]. Leaders who control employees with punitive measures and fear-producing tactics may induce employee compliance, but only when that leader is present. When the leader is not "on the floor," compliant behaviors will likely disappear. In fact, employees may do the opposite of what they are told in order to spite the authority figure and exert "countercontrol" [Geller(b)]. This occurs, in part, because employees feel disrespected and manipulated instead of valued; their self-esteem on the job is low.

Conversely, soliciting one-on-one input from employees (and responding to it) is a great way to increase their self-esteem. Experienced employees usually have creative, practical ideas for improving safety on the job. However, they may not share these ideas if a) they are angry about past leadership practices; b) no one asks for their opinion; or c) little is done about their safety suggestions (Geller and Williams).

Soliciting and responding to employees' concerns increases self-esteem as does sincere personal praise. Unfortunately, when employees are asked, "When was the last time you were complimented for working safely?" many respond, "I can't remember" or "Never." Praising safe work practices is an effective (although dramatically underused) way to improve self-esteem and promote champion attitudes. It is also more effective than excessive punishment in motivating optimal long-term safety performance [Williams(b)].

Factor 6: Belonging

The desire to belong can be seen in efforts to avoid disapproval and in attempts to gain approval (smoking as an adolescent), brand identification (buying a shirt because of the logo) and enduring initiation exercises to join clubs. Most people have a strong desire to be liked and accepted by others—including friends, family, coworkers, bosses and even strangers.

The employees' sense of belonging is enhanced by team-building exercises, group goal-setting and feedback, group safety celebrations and self-managed work teams [Geller(a); Williams and Geller]. Employee attitudes will likely improve to the extent that people feel connected to a team and part of a greater whole.

Factor 7: Empathy

Empathy is one's ability to imagine living in someone else's shoes. Empathizing is critical for healthy relationships, both at home and on the job. It often occurs nonverbally in response to another person's tone of voice, gestures, mannerisms and facial expressions. People who have strong empathy toward others are more sensitive, outgoing and popular than those who are less empathic (Goleman).

Reminders to empathize are helpful at all organizational levels. This is accomplished through one-on-one discussions, safety meetings and training (e.g., sensitivity and diversity training), and employee "testimonials," during which workers share personal experiences that impact their lives (e.g., a serious injury and its ramifications). Increasing em-

pathy minimizes the "us vs. them" mentality that can divide a workforce and negatively impact attitudes.

Factor 8: Self-Motivation

According to the learned needs theory developed by McClelland and associates (Steers and Porter), employees have one of four primary self-motivation styles:

- **Need for Affiliation.** Group cohesion and healthy interpersonal relationships motivate these individuals. They often attend to the emotional needs of others and have a strong desire to be liked by individuals in their cohort.
- **Need for Achievement.** These individuals take responsibility for solving problems, are often competitive and are extremely concerned with successfully completing their tasks.
- **Need to Avoid Failure.** These individuals typically avoid challenging tasks; they are drawn to tasks that are simple and ensure success and/or are so difficult that failure can be blamed on the nature of the task rather than personal skill.
- **Need for Power.** These individuals are highly motivated to exert influence over their environment. This category is broken down into the need for personal power (i.e., controlling others for personal satisfaction) and the need for institutional power (influencing others for the good of the institution).

Most effective leaders are especially high in the need for institutional power (Saal and Knight). These individuals put the needs of the organization (or workteam) before their own. To increase institutional power motivation within employees, they must be given power to manage important safety programs themselves. This promotes interdependence and champion attitudes.

Factor 9: Self-Monitoring

Self-monitoring is one's motivation and ability to inter-

Table 2

People-Based Factors (PFI)

PFI Inventory

For each of the following statements, indicate the response that best describes your opinions and beliefs within your work setting: Strongly disagree (1); disagree (2); neutral (3); agree (4); strongly agree (5).

1. Fate or luck is the main factor for success.
2. I can successfully accomplish most tasks
3. Things are generally better than they used to be
4. I'm not appreciated as much as I should be.
5. I'm part of a team
6. It is easy to read others' feelings
7. I'm not a very good listener.
8. I'm most strongly motivated by what's best for the team instead of what's best for me
9. I don't really understand what is expected of me.
10. I always understand why I do things
11. People don't really control their own destiny.
12. I'm very good at new things I do
13. Things are generally going downhill.
14. I'm valued in my work group
15. I have a strong sense of belonging with my team
16. It's hard to understand how others are feeling most of the time.
17. My job motivation is stronger for the betterment of the group than for my own advancement
18. I have trouble effectively expressing myself to others.
19. My behavior changes depending on the situation and who I'm dealing with
20. I don't understand myself very well.
21. I have a lot of personal control
22. I'm effective in most things I do
23. I'm optimistic about the future
24. My self-esteem is not very high.
25. I feel included in the group
26. I'm bad at reading others' emotions.
27. I have good communication skills
28. My motivation is fueled by the good of the company more than my personal power
29. My actions depend mostly on the situation instead of how I'm feeling at the time
30. I have a good understanding of how others perceive me

PFI Scoring

The following person factors are assessed in the PFI:

- Personal Control
- Self-efficacy
- Optimism
- Self-esteem
- Belonging/Group Cohesion
- Empathy
- Communication
- Self-motivation
- Self-monitoring
- Self-awareness

To score the PFI, simply add up the numbers for all items. However, items with a period at the end of the statement (1, 4, 7, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, 20, 24 and 26) are reverse scored. For these items, simply subtract the number from 6 to get the score. For example, a "2" response would be scored a "4" for items that end with a period. Scores range from 30 to 150. Higher PFI scores reflect more favorable person factors for the organizational culture.

Score	PFI Profile
135 to 150	ideal
105 to 134	favorable
75 to 104	moderate
45 to 74	low
30 to 44	poor

pret social cues from the environment and to respond to those cues in a socially desirable way. Low self-monitors act similarly regardless of the situation, whereas high self-monitors attempt to "fit" their behavior to the particular situations [Snyder(a)].

In research tests, high self-monitors understand subtle undercurrents in human interactions (Mill) and perform better on novel tasks (Haverkamp). They also become emergent leaders in ambiguous situations (Cronshaw and Ellis; Kent and Moss); receive higher job performance evaluations (Zaccaro, et al); and usually ascend to leadership positions within organizations more rapidly and frequently than low self-monitors [Snyder(b)].

Certain types of training (such as person-based safety training, sensitivity and diversity training) facilitate self-monitoring [Snyder(b)]. As individuals increase their self-monitoring, they will likely better manage conflict, empathize with others and be more successful on the job, thereby improving people's attitudes [Snyder(b)].

When employees' attitudes are favorable, employees follow safe procedures, report and fix safety hazards, and actively participate in safety initiatives.

Factor 10: Self-Awareness

Self-monitoring requires high levels of self-awareness, which is an individual's ability to understand his/her own emotions and actions, how those actions impact others and how others generally perceive them.

In addition, individuals with high self-awareness manage their own emotions more effectively. When moved to anger, individuals with low self-awareness are more likely to have negative outbursts and remember negative events longer than those with high self-awareness (Goleman).

Performance evaluations should improve workers' self-awareness. Unfortunately, these appraisals are often implemented poorly [Williams(a)]. To positively increase self-awareness and improve attitudes, managers should:

- use appraisals for developmental, not promotional, purposes;
- allow employees to evaluate themselves for the purposes of discussion;
- not use numbers to rate performance or rank-order employees;
- use the process as a tool for improvement and an opportunity to provide specific and sincere rewarding and correcting feedback.
- have employees give specific feedback to their supervisors about the supervisors' motivational tactics and influencing strategies.
- establish guidelines for further behavior-focused improvements in the employees' performance [Geller(a)].

Conclusion

The "so what" philosophies of some organizational leaders dramatically impact employees' attitudes. When the collective attitude of employees is poor, employees stop providing each other with feedback for safety; stop reporting near misses and injuries; resist safety improvement initiatives; and quit trying to make things better for the safety of themselves and others.

People-based factors matter. Increasing these factors in employees fosters more champion attitudes and leads to fewer complainer attitudes. This will lead to a healthier organizational culture and improved safety performance. ■

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