

Performing Up to Par¹

Joshua H. Williams

When it comes to safety, should you focus on workplace behaviors before addressing your organization's culture? Or does culture come before behavior?

The question sparked an interesting debate when posed to a handful of premiere safety consultants at the 'Light Up Safety in the New Millennium: A Behavioral Safety Symposium' conference sponsored this past February by the American Society of Safety Engineers. The answer should guide your safety efforts and determine your choice of safety consultants. While there is no blueprint answer, a brief analogy may help clarify the issue.

Improving performance: A golf analogy

Who do you develop the perfect golf swing? Many of us have spent a perfectly good afternoon hacking around a golf course and shooting triple-digit scores. A golf coach from the 'cultural' school would teach you to focus on the emotional and motivational aspects of your game. In other words, *thinking* yourself into performing better. Mechanics come up later, if ever.

Given the collective brain cramps most of us hackers have experienced, getting your emotional state in order has immense intuitive appeal. And this approach should work the first couple of times out as we murmur mantras like 'Serenity Now!' Then three months later -- as our cockeyed swing falls apart under pressure -- our mantra changes to phrases unmentionable here.

The problem is, in a 'cultural perspective' mechanics are either ignored or postponed. A behavioral coach, on the other hand, would focus first on the golfer's mechanics. Certain principles increase your chances of hitting the ball consistently long and straight: proper grip, good weight transfer, smooth follow-through. Good coaches teach and reinforce these fundamentals and tailor these principles to the unique characteristics (flexibility, strength, age, gender) of a player. Then, time permitting, attention can be focused on attitudes and feelings.

The same logic holds for safety. Reinforcing correct mechanics on a consistent basis leads to success. In golf, this applies to shoulder rotation. In safety, it relates to proper lifting techniques, for instance.

In both cases, effective observation and feedback are needed to encourage people to perform ideal behaviors on a more regular basis. Good shoulder rotation doesn't ensure a good shot, but it increases your chances. Proper lifting techniques don't eliminate the possibility of back injury, but they improve your chances.

1. In *Industrial Safety & Hygiene News*, 1999.

Attitude Adjustment

Returning to our debate, teaching appropriate attitudes is not so easy. Our values and thought have been taught to us by our parents are reinforced for many years. We cling to our values – about country, family, and even safety. And we hold a wide variety of different and competing values. An attempt to change and improve attitudes as a starting point is a tough sell for one person, let alone an entire organization. Improvements in attitude will follow if safety performance improves. Behavioral analysis, grounded in decades of objective research, is the most powerful tool in our arsenal to keep people safe. So, focus on behaviors first.

Overall, safety culture is an integral component of any organization. Improving behaviors will improve the overall culture. Just like improving your backswing and follow-through will improve your overall game. So, if safety and golf have anything in common, the behavioral consultants are on the right track.