

Quality Recognition: Key to Safety Improvement

To make us feel good and keep buying their audiotapes and self-help manuals, pop psychologists tell us we need to fail in order to learn. “Don’t worry about your errors,” they tell us, “we can’t learn unless we make mistakes.” Some support this assertion with reference to “the greatest home-run hitter in baseball.” “Do you know who struck out more times than any other professional baseball player?” they ask. The answer they give is “Babe Ruth,” and the implication is that he learned his fantastic skill by making errors.

This principle and anecdote from the annals of pop psychology might make us feel better about the errors of our ways and keep us listening to a motivational speaker, but such insubstantial verbiage does more harm than good if we believe it and act on it. Indeed, this could be an excuse for focusing more on people’s failures than on their successes. Some might even believe we need to push people until they make a mistake, and then point out the error in order for them to learn from the experience. Nothing could be further from the truth. [Although “The Babe” might be the best known baseball player, he did not hit the most home runs, nor did he strike out the most. Pop psychologists have fooled us again. To date, Hank Aaron hit the most home runs and struck out far less than Babe Ruth and Reggie Jackson -- the major league player who struck out the most.]

We Learn More From Success Than Failure

Behavioral scientists have shown quite convincingly that success -- not failure -- produces learning. Edward Lee Thorndike, for example, studied intelligence at the start of this century by putting chickens, cats, dogs, fish, monkeys, and humans in situations that called for problem-solving behavior. Then he systematically observed how these organisms learned. He coined the “Law of Effect” to refer to the fact that learning depends upon behavioral

consequences. When a behavior is followed by a “satisfying state of affairs” the probability of that behavior occurring again is increased. But, if an “annoying state of affairs” follows a behavior, that behavior (considered an error) is less likely to occur again.

Which kind of consequence, positive or negative, leads to the most learning? Does an error have to occur in order for the organism to solve a problem? We can reflect on our own experiences to answer the first question. A pleasant consequence gives us direction and motivation to continue the behavior. We know what we did to receive the reward, and are thus motivated to earn another. In contrast, a negative consequence following a mistake only tells us what not to do. It provides no specific direction for problem solution. And overemphasis on a mistake can be frustrating and discouraging, and de-motivate us to continue the learning process.

Errors are not necessary for learning to occur. In fact, when training results in no errors, made possible with certain presentation techniques, learning occurs most smoothly and is most enjoyable. Errors disrupt the teaching/learning process and can lead to a negative attitude, especially if negative social consequences accentuate the mistake. Even subtle reactions to an error, such as disappointment displayed in facial expression or verbal intonation, can increase feelings of helplessness or despair and turn a person off to the entire learning process.

The antidote to depressed learning from the negative consequences of incorrect behavior is the provision of positive consequence for correct behavior. And the most powerful positive consequence we can readily add to the situation to motivate correct behavior and support a learning process is social recognition -- the theme of this paper. I offer the following seven guidelines for maximizing the beneficial impact of interpersonal recognition.

Before leaving this topic of learning from success versus failure, it's noteworthy that Thorndike referred to the type of learning discovered in his problem-solving situations as “trial

and accidental success.” Many textbook authors have used the term “trial-and-error learning” when describing Thorndike’s research, even though Thorndike himself opposed the term because of its inaccurate implications. This is a potential source of the pop psychology error referred to above. This mistake also alerts us to read original research and not rely completely on secondhand interpretation. But let’s not focus on this error, rather let’s consider the need to support safety success with quality recognition.

1. Deliver It During or Immediately After Safe Behavior.

In order for recognition to provide optimal direction and support, it needs to be associated directly with the desired behavior. People need to know what they did to earn the appreciation. Then they are motivated to continue that behavior. If it is necessary to delay the recognition, then it is important to relive the behavior or activities that deserve recognition. Reliving the behavior means talking specifically about the performance warranting special recognition. Don’t hesitate to ask the recipient to describe aspects of the situation and the desirable behavior. This assures direction and motivation to continue the desired behavior. Connecting a person’s behavior with recognition also makes the recognition special and personal for the recipient.

2. Make It Personal for Both Parties.

Recognition is most meaningful when it is perceived as personal. Recognition should not be general appreciation that could fit anyone in any situation. Rather, it should be customized to fit the particular individual receiving it. This happens naturally when recognition is linked to the individual’s performance under designated circumstances.

The person giving quality recognition is expressing personal appreciation. It’s tempting to say “*we* appreciate” rather than “*I* appreciate,” and to refer to company gratitude rather than

personal acknowledgment. However, speaking for the company can come across as impersonal and insincere. Of course it's appropriate to reflect value to the organization when giving recognition, but the focus should be personal. "I saw what you did to support our safety process and I really appreciate it. Your example illustrates active caring and demonstrates the kind of leadership we need around here to achieve a Total Safety Culture." This second statement illustrates the next guideline for quality recognition.

3. Connect Specific Behavior with General Higher-Level Praise.

Recognition is most memorable and self-esteem boosting when it reflects a higher-order characteristic. Adding a universal attitude like leadership, integrity, trust-worthiness, or actively caring to the recognition statement obviously makes the recognition more rewarding. But it's important to state the specific behavior first, and then make an obvious linkage between the behavior and the positive attribute it reflects.

4. Deliver It Privately and One-On-One.

Because quality recognition is personal and indicative of higher-order attributes, it needs to be delivered in private. After all, the recognition is special and only relevant to one person. So it will mean more and seem more genuine if given from one individual to another.

It seems conventional to recognize individuals in front of a group. This approach is typified in athletic contests, as witnessed worldwide in the 1996 Olympics. Many managers take the lead from these events and give their individual recognition in group settings. Indeed, isn't it maximally rewarding to be held up as an exemplar in front of one's peers?

We need to realize that many people feel embarrassed when identified in a group setting. Part of this embarrassment could be due to fear of subsequent harassment by peers. Some peers

might call the recognized individual an “apple-polisher” or “brown-noser,” or accuse him or her of “sucking up to management.”

In athletic events the participants’ performance is measured fairly and the winner is objectively determined. While behavior-based safety recognition is also objective, it is usually impossible to assess everyone’s safety-related behaviors and obtain a fair ranking for individual recognition. Therefore, praising one individual in public may lead to perceptions of favoritism from individuals who feel they did equally well, but did not get praised. Plus, such ranking sets up a win/lose atmosphere. This may be appropriate for sporting events, but certainly inappropriate for a work setting in which the elimination of injuries is dependent upon everyone actively caring for the safety of everyone else.

It is beneficial, of course, to recognize teams of workers for their accomplishments, and this can be done in a group setting. Usually group accomplishment worthy of recognition can be documented for public review. And, since individual responsibility is diffused or dispersed across the group, there is minimal risk of individual embarrassment or later peer harassment. However, it’s important to realize that group achievement is rarely the result of equivalent performance from all group members. Some individuals typically take the lead and work harder, while others do less and count on the group effort to make them look good. Thus, it’s important to deliver personal and private recognition to those individuals who went beyond the call of duty for the sake of their team.

5. Let It Stand Alone and Soak In

I’ve heard pop psychologists recommend a “sandwich method” for enhancing the impact of interpersonal communication. “First say something nice, then give corrective feedback, and then say something nice again.” This approach might sound good, but it is not supported by

communication research. In fact, this mixed-message approach can cause confusion and actually reduce credibility. The impact of initial recognition is canceled by the subsequent correction, and then the corrective feedback is neutralized by the closing recognition. Keep recognition simple and to the point, and give your behavior-based praise a chance to soak in.

In this fast-track age of trying to do more with less, we all try to communicate as much as possible when we finally get in touch with a busy person. After recognizing a person's special safety effort, we are tempted to tag on a bunch of unrelated statements, even a request for additional behavior. This comes across as "I appreciate what you've done for safety, but I need more." To give quality recognition, you need to resist the temptation to do more than praise desired behavior. If you have additional points to discuss, it's usually best to reconnect later after the rewarding recognition has had a chance to be internalized and become a part of the individual's self-recognition system.

By giving quality recognition we give people a script they can use to reward their own behavior. In other words, our quality recognition strengthens the other person's self-reward system. And, self-reward (or self-recognition) is critical for long-term maintenance of safe behavior. Thus, by allowing our recognition communication to stand alone and soak in, we enable the internalization of rewarding words which can be used later for self-motivation of desired behavior.

6. Use Tangibles for Symbolic Value Only.

Tangibles can detract from the self-recognition aspect of quality recognition. If the focus of a recognition process is placed on a material reward accompanying the social approval, the words of appreciation can become less significant. And in turn, the impact on one's self-reinforcement system is lessened.

Tangibles can add to the quality of interpersonal recognition if they are delivered as tokens of appreciation. If they include a safety slogan, tangibles can help to promote safety. But how you deliver a trinket will determine whether it adds to or subtracts from the long-term benefit of your praise. The tangible must not be viewed as a payoff for the safety-related behavior, but only as symbolic of going beyond the call of duty for safety.

Even in a behavior-based safety incentive program, as I discussed in an earlier *ISHN* article (November 1992) and the October 1996 issue of *Professional Safety*, the tangibles should not be considered fair compensation for extra effort on behalf of safety. In an incentive program, however, people know beforehand what they need to do to earn a certain tangible reward. That's the incentive. In contrast, recognition is a reward without an incentive. An individual is caught doing right and is recognized for that behavior. And, if a tangible is presented along with verbal praise, it should be delivered with words that give it symbolic value.

7. Secondhand Recognition Has Special Advantages.

Up to this point, I've been discussing one-on-one verbal communication in which one person recognizes another for a particular safety-related behavior. It is also possible to recognize a person's outstanding efforts indirectly, and such an approach can have special benefits. Suppose, for example, you overhear me talk to another person about your outstanding safety presentation. How will this secondhand recognition affect you? Will you believe my words of praise were genuine?

Sometimes people are suspicious of the genuineness of praise when it is delivered face-to-face. The recipient of praise might feel, for example, there is an ulterior motive to the recognition. Perhaps the deliverer of praise is expecting a favor in return for the special recognition. Perhaps both individuals had recently attended the same behavior-based safety

course, and the verbal exchange is recognized as an extension of a communication exercise and thus devalued as sincere appreciation. Secondhand recognition, however, is not as easily tainted with these potential biases, and thus its genuineness is less suspect.

Suppose I tell you that someone else in your workgroup told me about the superb job you did leading a certain safety meeting. What will be the impact of this type of secondhand recognition? Chances are you'll consider the recognition genuine because I was only reporting what someone else said. And that person reported your success to me rather than you, and therefore had no ulterior motive for the indirect praise. Note also that this secondhand recognition can build a sense of belongingness or group cohesion among individuals. When you learn that a particular individual was bragging about your behavior, your sense of closeness (or friendship) to that individual will likely increase.

My main point here is that gossip can be beneficial -- *if it is positive*. When we talk about the achievement of others in behavior-specific terms, we begin a cycle of positive communication that can support desired behavior, as well as build internal systems of self-recognition. We also set an example for the kind of interpersonal communication that builds self-esteem, empowerment, and group cohesion. These are the very person states that increase actively caring behaviors and cultivate the achievement of a Total Safety Culture.

In Conclusion

Referring to classic learning research, I made the case that success is more important than failure in developing and maintaining desired behaviors. Thus, it's usually more important to recognize people for their correct behaviors than to criticize people for their mistakes. But, how we recognize people dramatically influences the impact of our interpersonal interaction. I

offered seven basic guidelines to consider when planning to recognize others for their contributions to organizational safety.

This list of guidelines is not exhaustive, but it does cover the basics. And, following these guidelines will certainly increase the beneficial effects of interpersonal recognition. Of course, the most important point is that more recognition for safe behavior is needed in every organization, whether given firsthand or indirectly through positive gossip. And, it doesn't take but a few seconds to deliver quality recognition.

Start giving recognition today -- even for behaviors that occurred yesterday. Delayed recognition is better than no recognition. And, quality recognition does not have to occur face-to-face. Leaving a behavior-based and personal recognition message on phone-mail, e-mail, or in a written memo (formal or informal) can make a person's day. It shows you appreciate what you saw and helps to build that person's self-recognition script for later self-motivation.

Perhaps realizing the beneficial consequences we can have on people's behaviors and attitudes with relatively little effort will be self-motivating enough for us to do more recognizing. But even more important than this awareness in increasing our recognizing behavior are the social consequences we receive when we attempt to perform quality recognition. In other words, the reaction of the people who are recognized can have a dramatic impact on whether recognition increases or decreases throughout a work culture. We need to know how to respond to recognition in order to assure that quality recognition continues. Stay tuned, this will be the theme of my *ISHN* contribution next month.

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NOTE: Dr. Geller presents numerous real-world examples of using quality recognition to improve safety in his new books "The Psychology of Safety" and "Working Safe." For more information, please call Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-7233 (SAFE).

