

### **Safety Momentum: What is it and how can we get it?**

My *American Heritage Dictionary* defines "momentum" as "impetus in human affairs." Sports fans and writers use the term "momentum" to describe a certain kind of performance in athletic competition. A team with momentum is doing things right and on the verge of cinching a win. Then when we see the opposing team gaining ground and looking like they could win, we say "the momentum" is shifting. So a team with momentum is a winning team.

A common coaching strategy is to call "time out" when it appears the opposing team has momentum. For example, research published in the *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis* in 1991 systematically analyzed 14 college basketball games during the 1989 National Collegiate Athletic Association tournament and found that basketball coaches called time-out from play when being outscored by their opponents an average of 2.63 to 1.0. And calling time-outs from play was usually effective at stopping the other team's momentum. The rate of successful plays during the three minutes immediately after a time-out was nearly equal for both teams.

Now my dictionary also gives a physics definition of momentum, which is "the product of a body's mass and linear velocity." Velocity is the speed or rate a mass is traveling and when the mass of a body is large, its velocity is relatively unaffected by an external force. In other words, the greater the mass and its velocity, the more difficult it is to stop the momentum. In sports, the more players (mass) with a high rate or fluency of success (velocity), the greater the momentum and the more difficult it is for the other team to make a comeback.

## **Relevance to Industrial Safety and Health**

Are you wondering what all of this has to do with occupational safety, particularly people's behaviors and attitudes? Of course, the notion that sports teams or safety has momentum is metaphorical. But this momentum metaphor does have intuitive appeal, and it can be useful when analyzing behavior and making decisions about safety intervention. It captures two general and separate aspects of an intervention process -- the number of people participating (mass) and the rate or fluency of relevant behaviors or activities (velocity). So the more individuals participating in a safety-improvement process and the greater the rate of process-related behavior, the greater the momentum. And the greater the momentum, the greater the likelihood the process will be sustained and contribute to the ultimate benefit -- a Total Safety Culture.

So let's consider factors relevant to increasing momentum or impetus to succeed. While I could find no research addressing specifically the challenge of increasing momentum, useful direction is provided by some psychological principles and even some common sense. In fact, we can return to the sports analogy for intuitive answers to the question, "How can we build and maintain momentum?" I think you'll agree from personal experience that three factors are critical to momentum-building -- Achievement of the team, Atmosphere of the culture, and Attitude of the leaders.

### **Achievement of the Team**

This factor is perhaps most obvious. Implicit in the concept of momentum is that success builds success. In other words, good performance is more likely after a run of successful behaviors than failures. In sports, a succession of winning plays or points

leads to the label of momentum. When the fans notice a series of successful behaviors from their team they say, "The momentum has shifted to our side."

Sports psychologists talk about momentum as a gain in psychological power, including confidence, self-efficacy, and personal control, that changes interpersonal perception and attitude, and enhances both mental and physical performance. All of this starts with noticing a run of individual or team achievements. What are the implications for safety management?

If momentum requires people to recognize sequences of small wins, then a scoring system is needed that can provide ongoing objective measurement of the participants' performance. Sports events provide us with scores linked directly to individual or team behavior, and thus we can readily notice and support momentum. I'm convinced this is a prime reason we like to watch or participate in sporting events. We get objective and fair feedback regarding ongoing performance. As a result, we can celebrate a win based on observable and equitable appraisal. Sometimes we can use these measures as feedback to improve subsequent performance and increase the probability of more success and continued momentum.

Hence, a key to successful safety management is finding an ongoing objective and impartial measure of performance that allows for regular evaluations of relative success. Then when people see continuous improvement in their safety "score," they recognize momentum and stay motivated to participate in the achievement-oriented process. This is why advocates of behavior-based safety emphasize the need to: a) develop up-stream process measures (such as number of audits completed or percentage of safe behaviors); b) set process-oriented goals that are specific,

motivational, achievable, recordable, trackable, and shared (for more on goal-setting see my Sept. 1994 ISHN article or my 1998 book on *Building successful safety teams* published by J.J. Keller and Associates); c) discuss safety performance in terms of achievement -- what people have done for safety, and what additional achievement potential is within their domain of control; d) recognize individuals appropriately for their accomplishments; and e) celebrate group or team accomplishments on a regular basis (see my prior ISHN articles on individual recognition and group celebration, January 1997 and February, 1997 respectively).

### **Atmosphere of the Culture**

Many sports fans are fickle. When their team has a winning record, they fill the stadium. And when their team shows momentum toward winning the competition, they cheer loudly and enthusiastically. However, teams with a losing record often play in front of a much smaller audience; and when the home team is not doing very well in a particular game, the crowd is quiet. When the opposing team shows momentum, sports announcers say "The home fans have been taken out of the game."

Having the home-team advantage means the fans are available to support momentum when it occurs. Sports fans can also get a losing team going by optimistically cheering when there's only a successive approximation to success. This atmosphere can motivate the team to try harder, and partial success can lead to total success and then momentum to achieve more. This stimulates the home crowd to cheer more, and momentum is supported.

I hope the relevance to safety is clear. Continuous participation in a safety-improvement effort is influenced by the atmosphere surrounding the process. Is the

work culture optimistic about the safety effort or is the process viewed as another "flavor of the month?" Do the workers trust management to give adequate support to a long-term intervention or is this just another "quick fix" reaction that will soon be replaced by another "priority"?

Before helping a work team implement a behavior-based safety process, my partners insist everyone in the work culture learn the principles underlying the process. Sometimes my partners do all of this initial education. At other times, they instruct a leadership team on the principles, and then members of this team do the instruction with my partners serving as teaching assistants. My point here is that everyone in the culture needs to learn the rationale behind the safety process, even those who will not be involved in actual implementation. This helps to provide the right kind of atmosphere or cultural context to support momentum.

When the vision of a work team is shared optimistically with the entire workforce, people are likely to buy in and do what it takes to support the mission. Then when this happens, interpersonal trust and morale builds, along with a winning spirit. People don't fear failure but expect to succeed, and this atmosphere fuels more achievement from the process team. Having the right kind of leadership is necessary, of course, to help people understand what cultural assistance is needed for momentum, and then to help mobilize such support.

### **Attitude of the Leaders**

The coach of an athletic team can make or break momentum. Coaches initiate and support momentum by helping team members and the team as a whole recognize their accomplishments. This starts with a clear statement of a vision and attainable

goals. Then the leader enthusiastically holds individuals and the team accountable for achieving these goals.

A positive coach can even help members of a losing team feel better about themselves, and give momentum a chance. The key is to find pockets of excellence to acknowledge, thereby building self-confidence and self-efficacy. Then specific corrective feedback will be heard and accepted as key to being more successful and building more momentum.

It does little good for safety leaders to reprimand individuals or teams for a poor safety record, unless they also provide a method people can use to do better. And the leader must explain and support the improvement method with confidence, commitment, and enthusiasm.

For momentum to build and continue, support means more than providing necessary resources. It means looking for success stories to recognize and celebrate. This helps to develop feelings of achievement among those directly involved (the team) and an optimistic atmosphere from others (the work culture). These are the ingredients for safety momentum. Keep these in place and your momentum will be sustained. Then you can truly expect the best from your safety management efforts.

### **In Conclusion**

Figure 1 reviews the three key ingredients I have proposed to build and maintain momentum in a safety-improvement process. I have no rigorous research results to support my claim, but I attempted to make my case intuitive by relating the three momentum-building factors to sports teams and their fans. The three ingredients start

with the letter "A," so they're easy to remember. Notice that they are clearly overlapping and interrelated.

The achievement of a team needs to be recognized and supported by everyone - team members, leaders, and the culture at large. Plus, the vision, goals, and commitment of a team leader need to be shared, appreciated, and owned by the team members, and everyone else who can encourage and applaud team success. And when team success is celebrated and held in high regard, the atmosphere of the culture is made more conducive to initiating and supporting momentum. So the factors influencing momentum actually become by-products of that momentum, and if recognized and appreciated, they in turn help to build more momentum.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.  
Senior Partner with  
Safety Performance Solutions  
Professor of Psychology  
at Virginia Tech

NOTE: Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help organizations develop safety management processes that facilitate the development of safety momentum throughout a work culture. For more information regarding books, manuals, videotapes, audiotapes, and consulting services please call SPS at (540) 951-7233 (SAFE).