

## **The Power in Asking: Always Seeking Knowledge**

“There’s no substitute for knowledge.” Years ago, I heard W. Edwards Deming say this several times throughout a four-day workshop on Total Quality Management. Now I repeat this same phrase in every university class I teach. It’s a powerful principle and it’s key to improvement, whether the focus is on safety, productivity, quality, or relationship building. But how do we obtain knowledge? That’s the focus of my *ISHN* contribution this month and next.

Knowledge comes in many forms. It’s public or personal, it’s objective or subjective, it’s understood or misunderstood, it’s useful or useless, it’s considered or ignored, and so on. My purpose is not to explore various types of knowledge, but rather to consider how we gain knowledge for improving the human dynamics of industrial safety and health. Quite simply, we need to ask more questions.

### **Why Ask?**

Before addressing the behavior of asking, let’s consider the outcome of this behavior. The motivation to ask more questions is inherent in the beneficial consequences of asking. So let’s begin with the end in mind. Why ask?

### **To Always Seek Knowledge**

The most obvious reason for asking is reflected in the acronym represented by the letters of ask – Always Seek Knowledge. We learn about other people’s behaviors, attitudes, feelings, and perceptions by asking them directly. For example, we should not presume the reasons for an at-risk behavior, but instead ask the performer. This allows us to see the situation from the one

closest to the action – the person performing the behavior. Then, if correction is called for, a plan can include the perspectives of the person who needs to own and sustain the improvement. This is a critical aspect of empathic leadership – a topic I covered in my *ISHN* article in June of 1999.

Sure, we usually have a personal viewpoint, essential for complete understanding of an environment-behavior relationship we observe. But we should ask for the other person's perspective first, then listen actively and patiently, and show we understand and respect that view. Even though the reaction might sound defensive, accept it as knowledge needed to completely comprehend the situation and derive an effective action plan. Then, after showing genuine appreciation for the other person's outlook, we can expect consideration of our interpretation.

### **To Show You Can**

When we ask for someone's opinion, we demonstrate concern. We treat others as people rather than objects or a means to an end (for more on this point, see my *ISHN* article in August, 2003). Unfortunately, our busy lives often prevent us from taking the time to ask more than "How are you doing?," and listen to anything more than "I'm okay, thanks for asking." However, we might take more time if we realized the powerful impact of asking.

To illustrate, consider this recent experience of a passionate safety pro. Joanne was asked to give an orientation session to four new employees of the construction division of her company. She gave a brief overview of the company and reviewed the standard safety rules and guidelines. Then she initiated lively

discussion by asking each employee their viewpoints about safety and their job expectations. The planned two-hour orientation expanded to a four-hour sharing of personal experiences, which enabled insightful learning of diverse perceptions, as well as consensus-building about various safety-related procedures. This valuable interaction occurred because the group facilitator asked her audience for their opinions.

During a brief break, Joanne rushed to the office of the two top managers of the construction division and asked if they would like to say a few introductory words to these new hires. Each manager declined, claiming to be too busy. Hence, an opportunity to show concern and commitment, and enhance a sense of belongingness was lost.

This safety pro told me she learned valuable information about the interests and talents of four different individuals, and she answered thoughtful questions from her audience. The knowledge gained from this interactive asking process enabled customization of the safety information, making the material more meaningful and relevant. Such personalization of the session reflected special caring. By treating the audience members as individuals, the orientation did not come across as a routine “cookie-cutter” program.

### **To Raise Self-Esteem**

Joanne’s asking-focused approach to employee orientation likely enhanced some individuals’ self-esteem. Whenever you ask a person advice or a personal opinion, you empower an increase in self-worth. Such enabling is especially potent when the person doing the asking demands obvious respect

and credibility. In this situation, for example, a person might think, “The experienced safety professional for this company is asking for my opinion. I must be important in her eyes.”

Imagine the boost in self-esteem if the top managers of the construction division had taken the time to ask these new hires how they see their interests and talents dovetailing with the daily challenges and overall mission of the organization. If they realized the people-power in such asking, they would have taken the time to ask. Do you see a need for feedback?

### **To Obtain Feedback**

Information relevant to improving our competence is termed feedback. Only with feedback about our performance can we improve our performance. Sometimes our behavior provides natural ongoing feedback inherent to the task, like when we see the results of painting with a brush, writing with a pen, or word-processing with a computer keyboard. More often, however, our behavior does not provide sufficient natural feedback for optimal performance. Even artistic and written expression benefits greatly from extrinsic feedback beyond that which occurs intrinsically.

Much of the feedback needed for competence-building is extrinsic, often coming from an observer. For example, a behavioral coaching process can assure the safe performance of a whole work team through interpersonal observation and feedback (for more on behavioral coaching for safety, see my *ISHN* article for May of 1996). Key to the success of a behavioral coaching

process is the willingness of the performer to be observed and to receive behavior-based feedback. Optimally, performers ask others for feedback.

Leaders who want to develop a continuous improvement mindset throughout their work culture should periodically ask for feedback about their own performance. The more interpersonal feedback requested and given throughout a workplace, the more performance improvement possible, whether for safety, productivity, quality, or relationship building.

Returning to the employee orientation session discussed above, the two managers will never know what they lost by not taking a few minutes to address their new hires. The safety pro will not feel comfortable making them aware of the missed opportunity to learn about the strengths and limitations of four new employees, unless these managers set the stage for such feedback by asking about the orientation meeting. Even the general question, “How was the orientation meeting?” could open the door for invaluable feedback. But it’s unlikely these managers will perceive the need to ask for feedback. As a result, only the status quo can be expected, rather than the desired continuous improvement.

### **To Improve Personal Impact**

By asking for feedback we improve our competence, and in turn increase the beneficial results of our performance. We can also enhance our impact by asking for more support. Do you ever resist asking for certain support because you assume the worst?

A friend and safety pro for a successful company is extremely passionate about learning as much as possible about the prevention of occupational injuries. I periodically inform him about upcoming professional development conferences that provide outstanding opportunities to add useful strategies to one's "safety tool box". The reaction I usually get is, "Oh, my company won't allow me to count conference attendance as work time, and they certainly won't cover my expenses."

Maybe a request for support is a long shot, but why not ask anyway? Many of us hold back our requests for support because we fear rejection denegration. We ruminate to ourselves, "Why waste time on a lost cause?" My *ISHN* contribution next month will address this issue, including effective ways to ask for support.

### **In Conclusion**

This paper targeted a specific communication strategy – ask. The value of simply asking for another person's opinion or advice was entertained as a way to facilitate open communication, help another person feel important, develop interpersonal belongingness, and learn information pertinent to improving the human dynamics of a work culture.

There is also much potential benefit in directly asking for feedback or supportive resources. In this case, a request is specific rather than open-ended, and can lead to an increase in personal competence or impact.

I hope it's obvious we have much to gain with this basic communication strategy. Perhaps our motivation to take time to ask will be enhanced by this review of the various positive consequences available – just for the asking.

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