

The Power of Context

The influence of context in determining whether we actually care for another person's safety cannot be overemphasized. Context actually can influence each step of the Latoni and Darley (1970) decision model described above and summarized in Figure 14.13. And the context in which behavior occurs can affect one's evaluation of the costs and benefits of helping versus not helping a victim. In other words, the perceived consequences of actively caring depend to a significant extent on the environmental and social context in which the relevant behaviors occur. Let's look more closely at this context variable, and consider its impact on safety-related behavior.

According to my *American Heritage Dictionary* (1991), context refers to "the circumstances in which a particular event occurs. (p. 316)" It includes both the outside and inside stuff surrounding people when they are performing. This refers to what we see others doing on the outside, and how we feel on the inside -- from feelings of competence, confidence, and commitment to perceptions of insecurity, uncertainty, and risk.

<Insert Figure 14.17 About Here>

Figure 14.17 is worth more than 1000 words to describe context. Have you seen a mild mannered and polite person turn into an impatient and hostile creature after getting behind the wheel of an automobile? The environmental and competitive context of driving interacts with certain personality characteristics to produce "Mr. Hyde" on the road. And then we have a nationwide epidemic of "road rage". Incidentally, our research attempts to identify those individuals most prone to demonstrate road rage has

shown that almost anyone can experience the negative emotions reflected in road rage, given the “right” context (DePasquale, et al., 2000).

I use a simple demonstration to teach the influence of context in my course in introductory psychology. I ask volunteers to simultaneously stick one hand in a bucket of ice water and the other in a bucket of hot water (around 100°F). After about 10 seconds, I ask the volunteers to remove their hands from the two buckets and put both hands in a third bucket filled with water at room temperature (about 70°F). However, the volunteers do not experience room temperature. In fact, one hand feels quite warm, while the other hand perceives a rather cool temperature.

You don’t have to be there to appreciate how the prior brief temperature exposure influenced subsequent perception. In fact, you’ve probably already guessed which hand experienced warm water and which hand experienced cold water. We live this simple context effect everyday. Coming indoors from the cold gives the impression of warmth, but in contrast to a hot summer day the same indoor temperature can appear quite cool. Yet experiencing “warm” in one hand and “cool” in the other while soaking in the same bucket of water brings expressions of surprise to my students.

An Illustrative Anecdote

On a ski weekend in Snowshoe, West Virginia a few years ago, I was reminded of the dramatic influence “context” has on human behavior. First, I need to explain that this was only the third time in my life I had ever tried to ski, and the first time was in 1974. Furthermore, the hills were quite icy, and the so-called beginner hills at Snowshoe appeared quite steep to me. I didn’t see a “bunny hill” anywhere. But my daughter

urged me on. So even with low competence and confidence and perceptions of uncertainly and high risk, I took to the crowded slopes. One near hit after another did not stop me, nor did one "wipe out" after another.

My numerous bruises qualified for several OSHA recordables. My only consolation was that I was not the only one in pain. The next day, many guests at the Silver Creek Lodge were limping around; some were sitting with legs wrapped and elevated -- more OSHA recordables. Most other skiers in my age range were much more experienced than I, and several told me they were having a difficult time because of the icy conditions. Their admonitions were not sufficient for me to ignore my daughter's urgings, "Come on dad, just one more hill; you can do it." I was also influenced by the "big bucks" I had paid for this ski weekend. I wanted us to get my money's worth.

The risky behavior of the slopes generalized to the ski lifts. And here lies the real context lesson of my story. The lift chairs had protection bars that could be pulled down conveniently. The signs requesting the use of these "restraining bars" hardly seemed necessary; the need for this protective device was obvious. The lifts rose to heights over 200 feet above the ground. It wouldn't take much for someone to slip off the seat, especially given the slick material of most ski pants. And when the lift stopped, the chairs rocked forward and backward slightly, making the need for this protective device even more evident. But here is the kicker -- the bottom line. More often than not, I observed the bars in the upright position. Most skiers were not using

this protective device. Did the risky context of the skiing experience influence decreased use of this protective device?

At every lift, a “courtesy patrol” person guided lines of people to the entrance, and another individual helped people take their seats. There was ample opportunity for these “professionals” to remind skiers to use the protection device, but I never heard such a reminder. And, the many long lines I stood in that weekend, gave me numerous opportunities to hear such a safety message. In fact, I learned later that my daughter’s friends rode the lift several times at first without pulling down the protection bar because they didn’t realize it was there.

I noticed the protective device, and used it everytime -- well almost everytime. I must confess that once my daughter and I rode a lift with two young men who appeared to be expert skiers. This time I didn’t pull down the bar, at least not at first. Instead, I waited for one of “the experts” to take control. Within the context of my insecurity and reduced self-confidence, I waited for someone else to intervene. Only when our chair stopped and rocked a bit, about 100 feet above the ground, did I reach up to pull down the protection bar. There I was, a researcher and educator who has studied and lectured about safety for over 25 years, and I hesitated to protect my daughter, myself, and two strangers.

Context is my only excuse for my lack of actively caring behavior. Not only did the use of this protective bar seem insignificant within the context of the greater perceived risk of skiing, but I hesitated to take control within the context of two experienced skiers. I might add that the two “experts” seemed quite perturbed at my

protective behavior. They both grimaced slightly, with one having to move his ski poles to make room for the protective bar. And long before we reached the end of our ride, one “expert” raised the protective bar, presumably preparing to dismount.

There were other examples that weekend of how my behavior was shaped by the context of what was going on around me. And I think you’ll see how this story related to safety and actively caring in the workplace.

A ski resort is a mini-culture, with its own set of rules, norms, behavioral patterns, and attitudes. And the environmental and social context at this busy ski resort was not conducive to actively caring for safety. The overriding purpose or mission of the resort is to give people the exhilarating experience of gliding down snow-covered hills of varying steepness. Nowhere in the resort’s mission statement was there a message about safety. Actually, for some people, an attempt to link safety with skiing would seem inconsistent. After all, skiers pay big bucks to take extraordinary risks. Why should we look out for their personal safety?

Context At Work

Does the mission statement of your industry reflect an overarching concern for production and quality? Is safety considered a priority (instead of a value) that gets shifted when production quotas are emphasized? Is safety viewed as a top-down condition of employment rather than an employee-driven process supported by management? Are safety programs handed down to employees with directives to “implement per instructions” rather than “customize for your work area”?

Are safety initiatives discussed as short-term “flavor-of-the-month” programs rather than an ongoing process that needs to be continuously improved to remain evergreen? Are near hit and injury “investigations” perceived as fault-finding searches for a single cause rather than fact-finding opportunities to learn what else can be done to reduce the probability of personal injury? Are the elements of a safety initiative considered piecemeal factors independent of other organizational functions rather than aspects of an organizational system of interdependent functions?

Are employees held accountable for outcome numbers that hold little direction for proactive change and personal control rather than process numbers that are diagnostic regarding achieving an injury-free workplace? Do employees take a dependency stance toward industrial safety whereby they depend on the organization to protect them with rules, regulations, engineering safeguards and personal protective equipment?

A “yes” answer to any of these questions implies contextual barriers that need to be overcome in order to achieve the ultimate injury-free workplace. A “no” answer to all of these questions is symptomatic of a work context that encourages people to actively care for the health and safety of others. In this kind of work culture, it’s not sufficient to rely on the organization’s safe operating procedures or even on personal responsibility and self-discipline but on interpersonal teamwork and a shared interdependent responsibility to protect each other. In this work context actively caring can be cultivated and a Total Safety Culture eventually achieved.

Summary of Contextual Influence

Here I reflected on a personal experience at a ski resort to illustrate the critical impact of environmental and social context (or culture) on individual health and safety. I hope it's clear that the context in which we perform can have a dramatic effect on our behavior and attitude. And a key part of this influential context is the behavior and attitude of other people. Think back to my daughter urging me on, or the savvy skiers I shared a lift with who disdained using the restraining bar.

Some organizational cultures inhibit the kinds of behavior needed to reduce industrial injuries. Getting employees involved in safety is difficult within the context of top-down rules, regulations, and programs supported almost exclusively with the threat of negative consequences. In contrast, employee involvement is much more likely with top-down support of safety processes developed, owned and continuously improved upon by work teams educated to understand relevant rationale and principles.

Metrics used to evaluate the safety performance of individuals, teams, and the organization as a whole are a powerful influence context. Employee commitment, ownership, and involvement can increase or decrease depending on the evaluations employed. Injury statistics provide an overall estimate of the distance from a vision of "injury-free," but they are not a diagnostic tool for proactive planning. If used as the only index of safety achievement (or failure), injury-related outcome numbers can do more harm than good, alienating people rather than empowering them to actively care for safety. On the other hand, numbers that measure the quantity and quality of

process activities related to safety performance provide the context needed to motivate individual and team responsibility. They direct continuous improvement of the process. Chapter 19 in part five of this handbook presents more details on developing a process-based evaluation system for continuously improving safety. The following chapters in Part Four recommend a variety of additional strategies for cultivating a work culture that promotes actively caring behavior.