

The Power of Indirect Persuasion

My first *ISHN* article of 2001 (last month) reviewed a basic principle of behavior-based safety. Namely, that behavior influences thinking and defines our self-perception or mental scripts of who we think we are. In other words, we act ourselves into having a certain opinion about ourselves. And these opinions or self-labels affect the quantity and quality of subsequent behavior.

My January article on behavior and self-perception also introduced a caveat. The context of our behavior determines whether it influences our self-perception. Sometimes we separate our overt behavior from our covert thoughts, and we don't allow one to influence the other. At other times, we see a connection between our behavior and our inner self. Our behavior reflects our values, and vice versa. Such behavior is self-directed and persists without external control.

Understanding the conditions or contingencies that make or break a perceived connection between behavior and self-perception is critical to sustaining involvement in a safety improvement effort. When interventions to improve safety-related performance facilitate a connection between behavior and self-perception, the desired activity has a chance of continuing after the intervention is removed. These interventions persuade people to change their behavior. This article compares direct versus indirect approaches to influence behavior. I hope to convince you that when it comes to increasing and sustaining participation in industrial safety efforts, the indirect approach is usually more effective because it is more likely to facilitate self-persuasion and create a supportive link between overt behavior and self-perception.

Direct Persuasion

Advertisers use direct persuasion. They show us people enjoying positive consequences or avoiding negative consequences by using their products. As such, they apply the ABC contingency of behavior analysis to sell their wares or services. The activator (or “A” of the ABC contingency) announces the availability of a reinforcing consequence (the “C” of the ABC contingency) if the purchasing behavior is performed (the “B” of the ABC contingency).

Advertisers also apply research-based principles from social psychology to make their messages more persuasive. Specifically, social scientists have shown advantages in using highly credible communicators and in arousing their audience’s emotions. Therefore, sales pitches are often given by authority figures and attempt to get viewers emotionally involved with product-related issues.

Note, however, these attempts at direct persuasion are not asking for behavior that is inconvenient or difficult. Normally, the purpose of an advertisement is to persuade a consumer to select a certain brand of merchandise. This boils down to merely choosing one commodity over another at the retail store. While shopping, consumers only need to move their hands a few inches to select one product over another. This is hardly a burdensome change in lifestyle.

Safety-related behavior is usually more inconvenient and requires more effort than switching brands at a supermarket. It often requires significant adjustment in a highly practiced and regular routine at work, at home, or on the road. Thus, adopting a safe way of doing something might first require the elimination of an efficient and

convenient at-risk habit. Furthermore, participation in a safety-promotion effort usually requires the regular performance of several bothersome safety-related behaviors.

Here's my point. Long-term participation in a safety-related work process is far more cumbersome and lifestyle-changing than the consumer behavior targeted by advertisers. As a result, direct persuasion is frequently not the best approach to increase safety-related behavior or promote long-term participation in a safety process.

Self-Persuasion

Direct attempts to persuade people to make troublesome changes in their lifestyle usually yield disappointing outcomes. For example, communication strategies have generally been unsuccessful when designed to persuade smokers to quit smoking, drivers to stop speeding, bigoted individuals to cease prejudicial behavior, homeowners to conserve water, or sexually active people to use condoms. Similarly, the "Just Say No to Drugs" campaigns have not influenced much behavior change.

I can quote rigorous research to support each of these failures of direct persuasion. But, you probably don't need research results to convince you that direct persuasion has less than desirable impact when it comes to sustaining participation in a safety-improvement effort. Your own experience has likely been the best teacher of this principle.

The problem with direct persuasion is that it's direct. It comes across as someone else's idea. And, it could give the impression the behavior is actually for someone other than the performer. This causes a disconnection between the behavior and self-perception. There is no self-persuasion.

Self-persuasion is more likely to occur when the motivational strategy is less obvious. Have you ever received flattery or a favor from someone and thought, “that person is only trying to get something from me?” In this case, your self-perception will not change, because you’re suspicious of the other person’s intentions. You might think, “She doesn’t really mean that, she’s only trying to win my favor.” My students use the term “kissing up” for this kind of behavior.

Behavioral research has shown, for example, that compliments regarding a person’s performance are more powerful when they are more indirect than direct. Your personal experience probably verifies this. Consider that you overhear a person tell someone else about your superb achievement on a particular assignment. Or, suppose a friend gives you secondhand recognition by sharing what another person said about your special talents. Both of these situations reflect indirect commendation, and would likely have more influence on your self-perception than a direct interpersonal statement of praise. Why? Because, the direct approach is tainted by the possibility the flattery is given for an ulterior motive.

Choice, Ownership, and Empowerment

The three words of this section title are used more and more often in safety manuals, speeches, and articles. These days many safety professionals have learned from experience that the best way to increase involvement in an injury-reduction process is to allow the workforce to have substantial control and authority over the desired procedures, from initial development to implementation and evaluation. Such employee ownership and empowerment is a primary ingredient of behavior-based safety, and is key to the remarkable success of this approach to injury reduction.

I've addressed ways to increase employee ownership and empowerment in several prior *ISHN* contributions. (See, for example, my articles on safety leadership in April, May, and June of last year, and June of 1999). My point here is that increasing choice, ownership, and empowerment reflects indirect persuasion with regard to behavior change. You're not telling people what to do in order to remain safe. Rather, you're giving people the knowledge, tools, and resources to implement a particular process that will help keep them safe.

Before training people about a work routine, you educate them about the principles and rationale. Then, you help them customize a specific protocol. Afterwards, employees are ready to be trained on the procedural steps they helped develop. (See my November 1996 article on the critical differences between education and training.)

I realize all of this empowerment stuff is easier said than done. But, surely you see advantages to this way of motivating long-term participation. It enables a reciprocal relationship between behavior and self-perception, and thereby facilitates self-persuasion, which in turn increases the probability of a sustained effort.

Indirect persuasion deviates significantly from the standard direct and top-down method of attempting to obtain compliance with safety regulations. Both approaches might be equally effective at motivating behavior change, but the indirect approach will be far more successful at enhancing the kind of internal dialogue needed to maintain behavior in the absence of an external motivator or accountability system.

In Conclusion

This article introduced the process of self-persuasion and its role in sustaining long-term behavior change. Situations most likely to facilitate self-persuasion are those which limit the salience of direct outside control. Bottom line: The more obvious the external control or accountability, the greater the disconnection between behavior and self-perception, and the less self-persuasion and sustained participation when the intervention is removed.

Defining intervention conditions that can make this happen is not easy, but start by asking yourself, "Does the situation promote individual choice, ownership, and personal accountability?" Does the context in which safety participation is desired contribute to connecting or disconnecting the link between what people do and what they think of themselves? Are the safety-related activities only behaviors or do they stimulate supportive cognitive activity or self-persuasion?

I hope this article helps you begin the challenge of answering these critical questions for the diverse circumstances and contingencies in your work culture. Next month, I will define additional conditions and contingencies that can increase safety-related behavior through self-persuasion.

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