

The Soft Side of Psychology: You Gotta Have Heart

Many safety professionals, especially those with a background in engineering, view psychology as a subjective “touchy-feely” discipline. When I hear this I’m quick to defend the *science* of psychology. I assert that psychological principles are founded on objective empirical research, and not on common sense. So, along with the science of engineering and medicine, we have the science of human behavior. Just as we have engineering and medical technology to benefit our quality of life, we also have behavioral technology to improve human performance. That said, there is a “soft” side to psychology. That’s the theme of this presentation.

Science and Technology Are Not Enough

The other day, while meeting with five top executives of a Fortune 100 company, I realized the need to consider the soft side of psychology. This four-hour meeting was about achieving an injury-free work culture. I was expected to provide insight on how to make that happen. The 15,000 employees at the various work sites of this organization had been taught the systematic observation and feedback techniques of behavior-based safety (BBS), as well as basic interpersonal communication and recognition tools.

The underlying problem was low commitment and participation in the various safety programs, including BBS. It seemed many employees were merely going through the motions (such as checking the safe vs. at-risk columns of environmental and behavioral checklists without actually conducting careful and thoughtful observations). As a result, the culture was not benefiting as much

as it could from the various safety-related procedures. Yes, some environmental hazards were removed, and some at-risk behaviors were corrected. However, many opportunities for safety-related improvement were overlooked. Some employee involvement did not appear to be genuine or heart-felt.

Throughout the meeting, we talked about the need to get more supervisors educated about the value of various injury-prevention methods and to develop accountability systems. Workers need to be held accountable for their proper involvement in various safety procedures, and the supervisors of these employees need to be held accountable to do what it takes to maintain employee involvement.

The supervisors' poor communication skills seemed to be a barrier to increasing and sustaining participation in safety initiatives. So we discussed providing communication training for all supervisors, from active listening techniques to the most effective ways of delivering supportive and corrective feedback. We also discussed various leadership strategies supervisors need to learn in order to be more effective managers of human behavior.

Reflecting on the process and outcomes of this meeting, which was typical of many others I've had with corporate management, I'm glad we addressed intervention approaches informed by the science of psychology. However, I'm disappointed we failed to discuss a critical ingredient – genuine actively caring. This is the heart of an effective safety process – the soft side of psychology.

Do They Really Care?

Please consider a fundamental principle of human nature: People react to how others feel about them. In other words, people sense when others truly care about them. It's not in the words or even in the technique, but in the intentions. And these are displayed in passion, verbal intonation, body language, and various aspects of the relevant context. When people believe their supervisor is well-intentioned, they forgive awkward or clumsy applications of accountability techniques.

On the other hand, when workers sense management doesn't really care about them, applications of the best performance-improvement process will fail. For example, some safety-bonus systems or safety-incentive programs send the message that management is most concerned about keeping the numbers low (such as the total recordable injury rate). With a focus on injury statistics rather than people, the impact of the best injury-prevention techniques will be disappointing. People participate only half-heartedly when they believe those in charge care more about the numbers than them. They might go through the motions, but with minimal ownership and commitment.

Now, I'm talking only about perceptions. But to people, perceptions are reality. Supervisors might really care, but give the impression they don't. They might, in fact, operate in a culture or work system that seemingly puts numbers and operations before people. And such a perspective might have historical precedence in the work culture. Thus, it can be very difficult to make a caring perspective prominent in a competitive, results-oriented work culture. But without

a people-focused actively-caring attitude, the output from an organization of people will always be less than optimal.

Two Ways to View Other People

The way people view others influences the feelings and actions of everyone involved. For example, people can see others as objects or a means to an end, or they can see others as other people with personal needs, feelings, and expectations. Current circumstances and prior experiences influence which viewpoint we take toward others, and it's certainly possible to alter our perspectives, even in the same situation that facilitated the alternative perspective.

Here's a personal example. In the university setting, it's easy to view students and teachers as objects providing a means to an end. From the student's perspective, the professor provides knowledge and most importantly a passing grade. Alternatively, from the professor's viewpoint, the students are merely bodies in a classroom who enable one's course to be taught and provide opportunities to display profound knowledge.

Many circumstances, including large classes and busy schedules, facilitate and sustain this "people-as-objects" perspective on a university campus. However, teachers and students do have opportunities to treat each other as people. For example, some students and professors work together on research and scholarship projects, and in the process get to know each other as individuals rather than impersonal objects serving a self-achievement purpose.

In fact, these are the relationships of a profession that make a career most fulfilling.

Without the opportunity to work closely with talented and motivated students as research and scholarship colleagues, my university position for 33 years would have been only a busy self-serving routine, and I would have left that environment years ago. Instead, I regret – actually I fear – the time when I'll be asked to relinquish my teaching and research opportunities at Virginia Tech. While my research, teaching, and scholarship has focused on the hard science of psychology, my inspiration and passion to keep going comes from my people-based experiences and relationships – the soft side of psychology.

In Conclusion

I've tried to explain and illustrate the critical role of feelings in attempts to manage safety. Proven techniques to improve the human aspects of safety cannot have optimal impact unless those implementing the procedures genuinely care. In prior *ISHN* articles I've called this "actively caring." For this to happen, people need to view others as people rather than objects that fulfill a self-serving need.

In prior *ISHN* articles, I've addressed the people-as-people perspective in terms of empathy. Whether the topic is empathic listening (*ISHN* Feb. 2002), empathic leadership (*ISHN* June 1999 & March 2000), or empathic performance appraisals (*ISHN* Nov. 2001) and corrective action (*ISHN* Dec. 2001), the focus is on the other person's feelings, needs, or perceptions. Starting with this

viewpoint makes every other management strategy more effective. Remember the platinum rule: Treat others as *they* want to be treated.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions teach organizations how to combine behavior-based safety with the soft side of psychology in order to achieve and maintain an injury-free workplace. For more information about related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.