

Actively Caring for Equity:
How perceptions of fairness impact a safety culture

What is the number-one reason couples seek professional help? No, it's not "sexual problems;" such difficulties are actually far down the list. The number-one reason given for why couples seek therapy is inequity, or perceived unfairness in their division of labor. Each thinks the other is not doing his or her fair share of the work. The result is relationship discord or distress, often leading to extramarital affairs, substance abuse, and excessive monetary expenditures.

Do I have your attention? Perhaps you can relate to this equity issue in an interpersonal relationship, or maybe you're wondering how this topic can possibly relate to industrial safety and health. While this article will not delve into the intricacies of building equitable relationships, it will show you how people's perceptions of equity can influence their contributions to safety. We will also explore ways to alter one's perception of equity in order to facilitate actively caring for safety. Let's first review the essence of equity theory--a popular research-supported explanation of job satisfaction.

Equity Theory

Originally developed in the 1960's for industry, equity theory proposes that employees seek to maintain a fair balance between their contributions to a job and the benefits they receive from that job, relative to the inputs versus outputs they perceive among their coworkers. In other words, an individual assesses his or her ratio of work input to compensation and then compares it to other people's input/output ratio. When these ratios are similar, job satisfaction is relatively high. But, what if a worker feels his or her input/output ratio is out of kilter with those of coworkers?

When individuals perceive themselves as either undercompensated or overcompensated relative to others, they experience distress and adjust their behavior and/or perceptions to restore balance or perceived fairness. Resolutions fall in one of five categories:

1. When workers feel underrewarded, they decrease their inputs, such as loafing on the job or leaving work early.
2. When individuals feel overrewarded for their efforts, they can increase their inputs.
3. Sometimes employees increase their outputs through legal action or illegal activities, such as stealing company assets.
4. Individuals make themselves feel better by distorting reality and rationalizing an inequity that favors them – “Everyone else does it, so why not I?”
5. The person can quit and look for a more equitable work situation.

Equity Perceptions and Industrial Safety

Do you see connections between these equity notions and occupational safety? Does an individual who feels under or overcompensated take more risks? I’m not aware of any empirical research related to this question; but work quality has been shown to decrease among under-rewarded employees, and adherence to a safety protocol should be linked to work quality. Furthermore, workers feeling undercompensated are not likely to actively care for safety.

Actively caring for safety requires people to go beyond the call of duty, which includes removing environmental hazards and reporting close calls, as well as correcting the at-risk behaviors of their coworkers. At the very least, it takes some inconvenience and extra effort to follow all the safety regulations of a particular job, whether donning personal protective equipment or slowing down and avoiding quick-fix shortcuts. But asking coworkers to correct an

at-risk behavior takes more than inconvenience, as I covered in my recent ISHN contributions on courage and compassion (September & October, 2008).

Thus, I think it's reasonable to expect below-average actively caring from employees who feel underrewarded relative to their coworkers. On the other hand, workers who feel overcompensated relative to coworkers are viable and valuable targets for safety leadership. These individuals feel distress or guilt because they perceive their input/output ratio to be lower than others in workplace situations similar to theirs, and thus they are ready and willing to increase their inputs. Opportunities to actively care for safety are just what these overrewarded individuals need.

Manipulating Perceived Equity

My guess is most readers do not put themselves in the overcompensated equity category discussed above. Indeed, in this day and age, it's difficult to find many coworkers who would classify themselves as overrewarded for their efforts. Employees are more likely to consider themselves overworked and underpaid compared to coworkers in similar situations. Thus, it seems untenable to decrease workers' perceptions of their inputs relative to outputs.

However, individuals' perceived outputs from their job could be augmented relative to their inputs. For example, Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org) indicates that outputs are both tangible and intangible, and lists the following as "typical outcomes": esteem, salary, employee benefit, expenses, recognition, reputation, responsibility, sense of achievement, praise, thanks. Note that most of these outputs reflect a perception of doing "worthwhile work" and can be gained through intrinsic reinforcement and interpersonal conversation.

My *ISHN* contribution last October (2008) defined five person states that increase one's propensity to actively care. Each of these states can be elevated by a person's work life. In other

words, the output of a work situation, from seeing the fruits of one's labor to experiencing recognition and appreciation from others, can enhance feelings of self-esteem, competence (or self-efficacy), personal control, optimism, and belongingness. When these positive outcomes are realized, an individual's perceived input/output ratio is lowered, potentially obligating the person to contribute more. How? By actively caring for safety, of course.

In Conclusion

According to equity theory, people feel distress when they believe they are getting too much or too little from their job than comparable coworkers. Those who believe they get more than they deserve may feel guilt or shame, while those who think they get less than they deserve may feel angry or insulted. The more perceived inequity, the more distress and the greater the pressure to establish a sense of fairness.

Equity can be readily restored through actively caring for safety. Those who feel overrewarded can attain equity by contributing more of their time and effort to prevent workplace injuries. In contrast, people who feel underrewarded need a boost in their five actively-caring person states before they can gain a sense of equity and subsequently feel obligated to actively care.

I predict this use of equity ratios to interpret job satisfaction and willingness to actively care will be received differently among readers. While some might find these notions intriguing and intuitive, others will consider these musings overly speculative and impractical. Such divergent opinions are partially explained by a personality dimension or individual difference I will address in my *ISHN* column next month.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Alumni Distinguished Professor, Virginia Tech
Senior Partner, Safety Performance Solutions

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply human dynamics to industrial safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller's books on People-Based Safety, including his latest: *The Courage Factor*, coauthored by Bob Veazie. For more information, please log on to www.people-based-safety.com; call SPS at 540-951-7233, or Coastal at 1-800-767-7703, ext 3313