

Understanding Interpersonal Trust

Further prevention of occupational injuries beyond current plateaus will occur when individuals work in teams to develop checklists of safe and at-risk behavior, use these checklists to observe the work behaviors of each other, and then provide constructive feedback from their observations in one-on-one and group situations. But of course the individuals who receive the behavioral feedback must believe the feedback report. They should feel good about reports of their safe behavior and be willing to correct instances of at-risk behavior.

Sometimes when I introduce these aspects of behavior-based safety to employees, I get active resistance. "No way," say some workers. The thought of a coworker watching them work, and tallying their observations of safe and at-risk behaviors for a subsequent feedback session sounds intrusive and aversive to these individuals. Similarly, several managers and safety directors have expressed agreement with the basic observation and feedback process of behavior-based safety, but then they say, "Our plant is not ready for such a process."

What causes such active resistance to an interpersonal observation and feedback process? What is missing in a work culture that is not "ready" for this basic component of behavior-based safety? Actually, I've heard the same answer to these questions voiced many times by both managers and line workers. One word says it all - trust. Lack of interpersonal trust causes resistance to an observation and feedback process, and interpersonal trust is what's missing in a culture deemed unready for behavior-based safety. This paper explores the concept of interpersonal trust, and introduces an assessment tool for measuring it. We can't increase interpersonal trust nor decide when a culture is ready for a process that depends on this feeling state until we understand what it is and know how to measure it.

What is Interpersonal Trust?

The first definition of "trust" given in The American Heritage Dictionary (1991, Houghton Mifflin Company) is "confidence in the integrity, ability, character, and truth of a person or thing" (p.1300). Interpersonal merely limits this definition to "person" or situations between people. This definition refers to behavior (as in "ability") as well as internal or person-based dimensions (as in "integrity" and "character"). As such, this definition is consistent with a measurement tool my colleagues and I use to assess interpersonal trust in a work culture. This survey device (given below) is based on research by John Cook and Toby Wall (as reported in the Journal of Occupational Psychology, 1980, 53, 39-52).

The survey distinguishes between intentions and ability. In other words, you could be confident that a person means well, but you might doubt his or her ability to complete the intended task. In this case, you trust the individuals intentions but you are not so sure that stated outcomes will occur. You lack confidence in the capability of the person to make good on his or her promise. This perception is common in situations where well-intentional managers or safety leaders verbalize missions, goals or policies that are viewed as idealistic or unrealistic. When punishment or reward contingencies, for example, are not carried out consistently and fairly, people's interpersonal trust can be limited to intentions and not actions.

It's also possible for individuals to have faith in the ability of others, but to mistrust these people's intentions. This happens, for example, when people are not kept informed of events or decisions leading up to a consequential policy change affecting their work life. When a policy change is sprung on workers without warning or rationale, they might become suspicious of management's intentions. They might believe their leaders have the intellect and skills to make things happen, but they might be

concerned about what particular things will happen. Do they really have our welfare in mind when they deliberate competently about changes in equipment design or production quotas.

Could there be a disconnect between intention and capability when management establishes a safety incentive program? Consider, for example, the program that offers everyone a prize if no one gets hurt over a certain period of time. This translates into a contingency that puts pressure on individuals for not reporting an injury. After all, if a person reports an injury, then everyone loses their reward. It's logical for workers to perceive this kind of program as a scheme to keep the numbers down without really caring about their personal welfare.

The following poem was written by an hourly worker in a chemical plant with a safety incentive program based on outcome (i.e., no injuries) rather than process (i.e., completing certain injury-prevention activities). It reflects mistrust or suspiciousness regarding the intentions of management, rather than management's ability to get the job done.

*With crippled limbs and mangled feet,
a million man-hours we did meet.*

*With record keeping such as these,
we'll reach a zillion, it will be a breeze.*

*Rewards are for achievements met,
but we ain't reached a million yet.*

*Their safety program is a sham,
as for you and me -- they don't give a damn.*

Interpersonal Trust among Coworkers

All of the example given so far to distinguish between trust in intention versus ability used management as the target. In other words, the focus was on whether a worker had confidence in the intention and/or capability of a manager or supervisor.

Interpersonal trust in a work culture, however, also refers to the extent people ascribe good intentions and abilities among their peers. In other words, a line worker might have confidence in the ability of a coworker to perform a job safely and competently, but might be wary of telling him or her certain things because of a mistrust in the person's intentions. Such mistrust is implied in the statement, "My partner might use the information against me for personal gain -- to get the promotion before me." Similarly, you might trust the intentions of a coworker ("He would never take advantage of me"), but lack confidence in his capability on a particular job assignment ("I'm sure he will do his best, but I'm afraid his lack of experience means his best will not be good enough").

The success of a behavior-based observation and feedback process certainly requires a high degree of interpersonal trust among coworkers. To accept and use behavioral feedback, a person must believe the feedback is accurate. And, if this feedback comes from another person, as is the case in a behavior-based coaching process, the recipient must have confidence in the person's ability to obtain the information used for feedback. This boils down to having confidence in the tool used to record behavioral information and the individual's ability to use this tool correctly.

But believing in the validity of an observation and feedback process and in the ability of a coworker to carry it out is not enough. Trusting the intentions of an observer is critical. The person whose behavior is being observed must believe the information will be used only for personal protection against injury and never as grounds for punishment. That's why a one-to-one behavioral feedback process begins with the coach asking for a coworker's permission to make the observations.

An Interpersonal Trust Scale

This discussion of interpersonal trust identified two dimensions of trust: 1) faith in the intentions of others and 2) confidence in the ability of others. And, from the

viewpoint of a line worker evaluating the overall interpersonal trust in a work culture, these dimensions can refer to either 1) other coworkers or 2) management. This fourfold classification system was used by Cook and Wall (1980) to derive a 12-item questionnaire to assess "Interpersonal trust at work."

The instructions for this interpersonal trust scale and the actual items are given in Table 1. Note that the researchers originally gave this survey to employees by reading them each item and asking them to indicate on a 7-point scale degree of agreement with a particular statement. The scale was as follows: 1 = No, I strongly disagree; 2 = No, I disagree quite a lot; 3 = No, I disagree just a little; 4 = I'm not sure; 5 = Yes, I agree just a little; 6 = Yes, I agree quite a lot; and 7 = Yes, I strongly agree. My colleagues and I include these 12 items on a questionnaire with many other items measuring other dimensions of a work culture. Respondents give their opinions on the same 5-point scale used for all survey items (ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree).

<Insert Table 1 about here>

Except for two items (2 and 12), the higher the scale value the greater the interpersonal trust. Since items 2 and 12 are negatively phrased, these need to be reverse scored. In other words, for these two items, the number selected is first subtracted from "8," so a "1" becomes "7," a "2" becomes "6," and so on.

Totaling the 12 item scores for a particular survey (with items 2 and 12 reverse scored) yields an estimate of an individual's perception of overall interpersonal trust in his or her work culture. And you can obtain an overall trust index by calculating the mean survey score from many respondents. You can also estimate the different dimensions of trust introduced in this article. Specifically, items 3, 5, and 8 assess faith in intentions of peers (or coworkers) and items 1, 7, and 12 address faith in the

intentions of management. Confidence in the ability or actions of peers is measured by items 9, 10, and 12; whereas items 2, 4, and 6 refer to confidence in the capability of management.

Please note there is nothing special or magical about the wording of these items. You should feel free to re-word a particular item if different language fits better with your culture. And you could decide to add or substitute new items. Note also that the scale was developed to measure interpersonal trust from the viewpoint of an hourly worker. With only slight adjustments, the scale can also estimate interpersonal trust from a manager's perspective.

In Conclusion

The fourfold classification system for interpersonal trust is an important contribution of the Cook and Wall survey tool. In industrial settings, it's instructive to differentiate perceptions of interpersonal trust as targeting management or one's coworkers and with regard to another person's intentions versus his or her actions. This latter dichotomy is useful when evaluating at-risk behavior or human error (as I discussed in my *ISHN* articles last November and December). Recall that human error, whether a slip, lapse, or mistake, is unintentional. The individual does not intend to be at risk, nor to cause property damage or an injury. So an error calls into question only a person's capability, not his or her intentions.

Wouldn't it be nice if everyone trusted each other's intentions with respect to health and safety. Then when at-risk behavior, a "near miss," property damage, or an injury occurs, the focus would be on an individual's capability to act safely under particular circumstances. This would lead to fact finding (not fault finding) regarding ways to improve behavior rather than to correct a "bad attitude." Then an observation and feedback process would be trusted as a method for obtaining information relevant

to correcting environmental and system factors that facilitate at-risk behavior or human error.

So increasing trust throughout an organization is key to involving people in behavior-based safety. Safety improvement requires an interdependency paradigm or a system in which everyone looks out for the safety of everyone else. Such a perspective depends on trusting each other's intentions and abilities to do the right thing. How can we increase this critical trust factor in a work culture? Stay tuned, because that's the theme of my *ISHN* article next month.

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NOTE: Dr. Geller and his colleagues at Safety Performance Solutions teach ways to increase interpersonal trust throughout a work culture. For information on seminars, books, videotapes, and audiotapes on this subject, please call (540) 951-7233 (SAFE).