

Values-Driven Safety

On many occasions, I have written and spoken about the need to envision safety as a value rather than a priority. Priorities shift around depending on current needs and contingencies. The number one priority today will not remain at the top of the demand hierarchy indefinitely. Other problems, issues, goals, or tasks will rise to the top as the result of many dynamic factors. Indeed, change is a constant, and leading or adjusting to change requires flexibility and strategic modification of priorities.

Values are more constant than priorities. From an individual perspective, values represent our profound internal beliefs or attitudes that establish a frame of reference or context from which we evaluate past behavior and plan future behavior. Likewise, the values of an organization are defined in its mission statement or vision and provide general direction for both short-term and long-term action plans.

Given this definition of “value,” it’s obvious why it’s better to talk about safety as a value than a priority. Priorities change or are compromised to make way for other priorities. On the other hand, values are rarely compromised. They serve as the standard against which we judge the appropriateness of our behaviors. When our actions are inconsistent with our values, we willingly make appropriate adjustments to align behavior with value. Thus, if safety is considered a value, the safest way of doing something becomes the standard against which ongoing work practices are evaluated; and if an inconsistency is pointed out, behavior is willingly changed.

Recently, safety consultants and writers have advocated a values-driven approach to safety, sometimes as a critique of behavior-based safety. “It’s not enough to change people’s behavior,” these consultants say, “You must get inside people and change their values.” I do not disagree with such an assertion, but a values-based approach to safety is not inconsistent with a behavior-based approach. This is fortunate, because there are many more techniques available to influence behaviors than values in an organizational setting.

If a person holds safety as a value, or at least accepts the notion that safety should be a value rather than a priority, then it's relatively easy to increase behaviors consistent with this value and to decrease behaviors inconsistent with safety. It starts with helping people understand what is "safe" and "at-risk" behavior. Then when you observe an inconsistency between a value and a behavior, it's not necessary to apply distasteful punishment procedures. Instead, point out the inconsistency and expect a change consistent with the value. This illustrates the Principle of Consistency -- a powerful determinant of behavior and attitude change.

A Personal Anecdote

What would your reaction be if you received a phone call from a police officer who asked you to come down to the station and pick up your son or daughter? When the police officer introduced himself and said he needed to talk with you about your teenage son or daughter, your heart would undoubtedly pound furiously with fear of hearing some terrible news. Then you learn your sixteen-year old daughter was caught consuming alcohol and you need to go to the police station and get her or she will have to stay in jail overnight. What would you be thinking now? Would your fear turn to anger? Would you begin planning a series of punitive consequences (referred to as "discipline" in industry) so as to make certain this teenager will never consume alcohol again -- until they're 21? Five parents got such a phone call from the Blacksburg Police Department in December, 1996 (on Friday the 13th). Their daughters, all 16 years old and varsity athletes, were stopped, searched, handcuffed, and arrested for underage drinking. One of those teenagers was my daughter -- Karly.

Why Do Teenagers Drink?

It's instructive to consider why teenagers use drugs, including alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana. Conformity or peer pressure is certainly a factor, but why is the purchase and consumption of these drugs considered valuable? They don't taste good, at least at first, and everyone knows they are not good for you. For years these teens have heard the slogan "Just say no to drugs." Why is it difficult for some teenagers (and adults) to say "No"?

Consider that the redundant message “Say No” can make the drug seem desirable. It’s the “forbidden fruit” phenomena, as told in the Biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Forbidding something makes that something seem valuable. If we can beat the system and get the “forbidden fruit” we might experience an extra rush of pleasure because we asserted our freedom in a top-down situation perceived as stifling our individuality and creativity. This illustrates a phenomenon social psychologists refer to as “The Scarcity Principle.”

Items or opportunities that appear scarce in the eyes of the beholder seem more valuable. Thus, drugs seem desirable to some because they are scarce, and consuming drugs can feel more pleasurable because the behavior itself represents a scarce freedom. I’m not advocating the legalization of drugs or the lowering of the legal age for alcohol consumption. But understanding the scarcity principle can help us appreciate why certain illegal acts occur and why increased enforcement of laws does not help to develop individual values.

External Control and Values

When we perform in certain ways because of external controls or threats we say we are doing it because we have to not because we want to. Under such circumstances we feel no obligation to adjust our inner self (including our beliefs and values) to conform with our outer self (our behavior). We can live with the inconsistency between what we do (follow the rules) and our belief (that the rule is silly and unreasonable). And when we are in situations where enforcement of a rule is difficult, we are apt to break the rule. Hence, most workers use their personal protective equipment (PPE) when it’s called for in the workplace, but many don’t use appropriate PPE when doing even riskier jobs at home. What percentage of your neighbors wear ear plugs, safety glasses, and steel-toed shoes while mowing their lawns?

Our outside self (behavior) influences our inside self (attitudes, beliefs, values) when we perceive our behavior was our idea (at least to some extent). That’s why it’s so important for people to volunteer for safety promotion efforts. When people choose to get involved in a safety process, their behaviors (from developing components of the process to teaching it to others)

help develop or support an internal value or belief system that drives the appropriate behavior in the absence of external controls.

Consequently, values-driven safety will not come from increasing external controls over behavior. Rather, it is cultivated in situations that provide a clear purpose or mission (the value), promote a variety of straightforward methods for accomplishing the mission, and allow people to choose and customize procedures for their particular setting. Of course, this is easier said than done, and it's often tempting to exert external controls when things don't go our way. This brings me back to the story of underaged drinking that "hit home" so forcefully.

Inconsistent Behavior

My wife got the phone call from the Blacksburg Police Officer, and drove to the station to pick up Karly. Yes, this was the daughter I've written about many times to illustrate youth involvement in safety efforts. At age 3½ she held up a large sign in the window of my car with the message "Please Buckle Up -- I Care." In the fourth grade, she gave a speech about this "flashing" experience for safety and won the "Best Speech of the Year" award. At age 14 she helped me demonstrate to the media that young teens can too easily purchase cigarettes by attempting to buy cigarettes in 20 different stores. [She was only turned down twice, and incidentally seemed to really enjoy the experience of beating the system to purchase a "forbidden fruit".] And Karly has also helped my students and me in our government-funded research designed to develop interventions for preventing alcohol abuse and alcohol-impaired driving.

Now my daughter was caught doing something completely inconsistent with the internal value that should have developed from her personal involvement in safety and health promotion. I was reassured Karly had the right values when she sobbed so uncontrollably after seeing my wife Carol. "I'm so embarrassed, Mom" she said, "This is like a bad dream; this is not me." "Right," said Carol, "This is not you."

What Consequences?

What punitive consequences are appropriate for this situation? Underaged drinking is surely a tragic public health problem, and the thought that such behavior could lead to alcohol-

impaired driving is downright scary. So what should a parent do? It was interesting, and predictable, to learn what the parents of these five teens did do in this situation.

As you might have guessed, the common reaction was to exert additional punitive controls. At a minimum, all of the girls were “grounded” over the Christmas holidays. One girl lost her car-use privileges completely, forcing her to take the bus to school (a very humiliating experience for this teen). Another girl was forbidden to interact socially with any of the other four cohorts. Incidentally, this individual had claimed she was not drinking the alcohol -- a lie she created to avoid additional punishment. Thus, the threat of external control motivated another undesirable behavior. When we do not own up to our mistakes, we don’t experience maximum inconsistency between our behavior and our values. Therefore we don’t feel obligated to change our behavior.

According to The Consistency Principle, my wife had the best reaction in this situation. She reinforced the inconsistency between Karly’s behavior and her values. She actively listened to Karly’s description of the humiliating experience of being searched and handcuffed and escorted to the police station. The police officers appeared unimpressed with Karly’s report that she had assisted my research projects to prevent drunk driving. By responding with empathy to Karly’s perceptions, feelings, and emotions, Mom enabled her daughter to own the inconsistency between her behavior and her values. This maximized the probability of values-driven behavior.

To be sure, Carol and I are thankful for the external controls that threaten humiliating penalties for noncompliance with drug-use laws. And we are grateful our daughter experienced the punitive consequences, and appeared in court to state remorse to the same judge who preached to her a year earlier about safe driving during a formal presentation of her driver’s license -- her privilege to operate a motor vehicle. But we also realize these external controls are not sufficient to maintain safe behavior. The perceived improbability of getting caught again cannot compete with the daily influence of peers tantalized by “forbidden fruits.” We can only hope pressure to avoid inconsistencies between behavior and value will be more powerful than pressures to conform with the risky behaviors of others.

In Conclusion

My personal anecdote took this discussion beyond safety and health issues in the workplace. But I hope the connection between a family's experience with underaged alcohol consumption and values-driven safety is clear. An external threat is often most convenient and expedient, but it has clear disadvantages when attempting to make safety a value. In some cases, severe threats can actually make the undesirable behavior seem desirable. In situations with exclusive top-down controls and minimal bottom-up empowerment, getting away with noncompliance is reinforced with outside peer support and inside feelings of individual freedom.

We need to understand and believe values-driven safety cannot be dictated. Values can be developed from outside sources that encourage voluntary participation in activities representing or supporting a particular value. We internalize the principles and lessons we choose to experience, but we are apt to resist those principles and lessons we feel are forced upon us. Obviously, it's a difficult but important challenge to provide just enough outside influence to make a program or process appear worthwhile and inviting without inhibiting feelings of personal choice and control. In this regard, please remember another principle from behavioral science I've discussed in various ISHN articles: we perceive more choice and personal control when working to achieve positive consequences (rewards) than when working to avoid negative consequences (penalties).

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor
Virginia Tech

NOTE: Dr. Geller teaches research-based techniques for inspiring values-driven safety in his latest books, videotapes, audiotapes, and live seminars. For specific information, call Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-SAFE (7233).