

What's Your Perception? The Seeing Component of People-Based Safety™

Do you follow the Golden Rule? Do you “treat others as *you* want to be treated”? If so, that’s good but not great. The Platinum Rule is better because it recognizes that people see the world differently.

What's the Platinum Rule?

People-Based Safety (PBS) teaches the Platinum Rule—“Treat others as *they* want to be treated”. This principle is founded on the need to understand the perceptions of others before making intervention decisions that impact their lives. To illustrate this perspective, I tell audiences of a memorable experience I had in third grade. My teacher called me to the front of the class to recognize me for the superb job I did on my homework assignment. Later, several classmates beat me up in the playground.

I did not want public recognition in the classroom. But, my teacher did not see the classroom situation as I did. Perhaps she had heard that silly pop-psychology slogan, “Reprimand privately and recognize publicly.” She meant well, but did not consider my perceptions before implementing her intervention. Understanding workers’ perceptions is a critical challenge of PBS, both when developing and delivering a process to support safe behavior and/or to correct at-risk behavior.

Safe Perception Surveys

As I reported in an earlier *ISHN* article (November 1994), perception surveys are useful in assessing workers’ views of safety at their facilities before and after the implementation of a process to improve safety-related behavior. Pre-intervention surveys inform the design of intervention strategies, and comparisons of pre- and post-intervention surveys estimate the diverse impact of an intervention on people’s perceptions, attitudes, and values.

My SPS partners have been applying the same comprehensive perception survey for over a decade, and thus have a database of more than 8.5 million safety-related perceptions across a broad range of industries worldwide. These culture surveys are invaluable for benchmarking, and for customizing intervention strategies for various types of operations within a particular work culture.

Bottom line: People's views of safety-related issues vary widely and should be considered when designing and evaluating procedures for improving safety performance. The following review of some topics from my prior *ISHN* articles illustrates the power of perception in influencing safety-related behavior.

Risk Perception

Researchers have identified a number of psychological factors that influence an individual's perception of risk and safety-related behavior. High on this list is the role of familiarity. The more experience we have regarding a potential risk, the less risk we perceive. You can appreciate this principle by recalling your safety-related behaviors when you first started to drive and comparing them with your current driving. As experience increases our perception of control, it also increases the possibility of risk-taking.

In my *ISHN* article last month (September 2005), I discussed the importance of perceived choice when transitioning from other-directed accountability to self-directed responsibility. Here, consider how less risky those hazards we choose to experience seem (on the road, in the workplace, and during recreation) compared to those hazards we feel compelled to endure (like food preservatives, environmental pollution, and earthquakes).

Most practical from an intervention perspective is the fact that perceived risk is raised more easily with individual case examples than group statistics. This suggests a shift in format

for group safety presentations. Specifically, safety meetings and interventions should focus on individual experiences rather than numbers. This implies a need for the work culture to encourage the public reporting of close calls and injury experiences. When people hear the personal perceptions and regrets of the recipients of a workplace injury, they imagine themselves in a similar unfortunate circumstance. Their perception of risk is thereby enhanced, and safe behavior increases.

A Just and Fair World

The common perception that “people get what they deserve,” has intriguing implications for industrial safety. I believe this perception contributes to the common perspective, “it won’t happen to me”. Since most believe they are essentially good and therefore undeserving of a bad-luck injury, they expect the “other guy” to get hurt on the job – not them. Everyday experiences usually support this perception. Injuries do happen, but not to most individuals, even when they take risks.

Also, the public generally perceives workplace injuries as justifiable. They are indiscriminately distributed among workers who take risks, and thus deserve what they get. This perception lessens the outrage people feel when someone gets hurt on the job.

Furthermore, the benefits of risky work behaviors are obvious to all (from individual comfort, convenience, and efficiency to increased output). Aren’t injuries just the cost of doing business? This public perception can make it difficult to get financial resources for corporate safety efforts.

Perceptions of Protection

When you feel protected, do you take more risks? Many people do. Such increased risk taking is due to perception. People presumably accept a certain level of risk, which varies widely

across individuals. This perception is influenced by a number of factors, from personality characteristics to prior training and experience. When their perception of risk changes, people change their behavior accordingly.

The implication of this phenomenon is that making a job safer with machine guards or PPE lowers people's risk perception and thus can lead to an increase in at-risk behavior. This change in perception and behavior as a function of protection is intuitive and is supported with sound research. However, the increase in risk-taking and injuries does not negate the benefits of the protection. Although football players increase at-risk behaviors when suited up with protective gear, they sustain far fewer injuries than they would without the PPE.

Since risk perceptions and safety-related behavior are influenced by the use of protective devices, safety pros need to be aware of this phenomenon and adjust their training programs and coaching procedures accordingly. For example, when safety guards or PPE are added to a work task, behavioral observers should be alert to the possibility of extra risk-taking related to the behaviors protected by the new safety equipment.

Perceive and Seize the Moment

I'd like to review one more safety-related perception; one that contributes to many injuries. I introduced it in my *ISHN* column a little over a year ago (June 2004) as a perceptual orientation making me injury prone. Specifically, my Type-A personality and need-to-achieve attitude facilitate a future-oriented mindset that gives too much attention to the future and too little on the present. I can still hear my mother admonishing me to "stop and smell the roses".

Perceiving and seizing the moment means being mindful and attentive to our ongoing behavior in every respect. We are using all relevant senses to recognize what we are doing and where we are doing it. Our antennae are fully extended, enabling us to fully encounter the

present. Now that's a perceptual orientation that surely makes a mishap unlikely. Procedures and tools of PBS help to initiate and support present-focused perceptions and mindfulness.

In Conclusion

This article reviewed the importance of perception when addressing the human dynamics of injury prevention. We cannot assume other people see what we see, and interpret risks and risk taking as we do. PBS teaches empathy--the need to assess the perceptions of a work group or culture targeted for an injury-prevention intervention. These perceptions are carefully considered when customizing an intervention process.

PBS also teaches techniques for hazard recognition and risk assessment. These include: a) appropriate alternating between focusing and scanning (as covered in my December 2003 *ISHN* column), b) the Exposure-Severity-Probability (ESP) approach to risk assessment (as detailed in my April 2003 *ISHN* column), and c) the development and application of a Critical Behavior Checklist (as explained in my May 2003 *ISHN* column). A repeat of these PBS tools is not warranted here, but the presentations referenced above are readily available on the SPS and *ISHN* websites. They are also explicated in my recent book, "People-Based Safety: The Source".

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply the principles and procedures of People-Based Safety (PBS). Also, Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has recently published Dr. Geller's new book on PBS, as well as five video/CD/DVD programs, accompanied by workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please log on to www.safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.