Where are the Safety Success Seekers?

In my *ISHN* article last month, I defined four personality states that influence people's motivation and behavior. These personality factors were described as states rather than traits, meaning they are situation-specific and malleable. Therefore, it's possible to change an individual's person states from one that is detrimental to the attitudes and behaviors needed in a certain situation to one that facilitates the desired performance.

Four Person States

The four person states introduced in my *ISHN* column last month were derived from a two-dimensional matrix that categorized people according to whether they work to succeed or avoid failure in a particular situation. Some people are motivated by both a need to succeed and a fear of failure, while others focus rather exclusively on either achieving success or avoiding failure.

When we work primarily to achieve success, we are "success seekers," as opposed to "failure avoiders" who are motivated by fear of failure. As "overstrivers" we are driven to avoid failure by working in excess to succeed. In this state, we are not "happy campers" but experience skepticism, low emotional control, high anxiety, and unstable self-esteem. The fourth state is "failure accepter," which occurs when a person expects failure regardless of personal effort and is resigned to apathy or indifference.

From Failure Avoiding to Success Seeking

Do you know people who are failure avoiders or failure accepters with regard to workplace safety? How would you classify yourself? Does your

classification vary according to the environmental context or the individuals on your work team? Are there more safety success seekers in situations where there is more positive participation for safety?

According to systematic research and basic intuition, the most productive and healthy person state is "success seeker". With their high expectancy for success and low fear of failure, success seekers respond to setbacks with optimistic persistence, self-assurance, and a sense of personal control. These person states provide fuel for more success seeking.

Thus, it's obvious safety pros need to find ways to facilitate success-seeking person states in industrial safety and health. The more safety success seekers in an organization, the greater the probability of achieving and maintaining an injury-free workplace. Let's consider ways to increase the number of safety success seekers in a work group.

A Focus on Failure

Many aspects of the traditional industrial safety program seem to emphasize failure avoidance over achievement. How do you evaluate your safety performance? If the key indices are number of recordable lost-time injuries, the focus is on avoiding failure. If safety rewards or financial bonuses are based on "days without an injury," failure avoidance becomes a primary motivator. When companies are ranked according to their OSHA-recordable injury rates, a reactive failure-avoidance stance takes precedence over success seeking.

When does management get most concerned about safety? If lost-time injuries seem to arouse the most attention to safety, avoiding failure is promoted. If management considers "injury investigation" the key job responsibility of the company safety pro, avoiding failure is given priority status. When managers summarize their organization's safety performance with injury statistics and loss-control numbers, they put clear and obvious emphasis on avoiding failure.

Given these characteristics of traditional safety, it's understandable why a failure-avoiding state can be the prominent motivation of workplace safety. And if failures (or injuries) keep occurring in spite of people's best efforts to avoid them, a mindset of "failure acceptance" can develop. This is an apathetic and helpless perspective that stifles participation in any safety-improvement effort.

Focus on Proactive Success

So, with traditional safety it's easy to develop a failure-avoiding mindset. The obvious antidote is to focus on safety achievement rather than injury avoidance. Simply put, this means associating more positive than negative consequences with safety. This is easier said than done.

With quality production, positive consequences are inherent with the ongoing work activities. People can usually see evidence of achievement when contributing to the production of a quality commodity or service. Plus, the scoring system for the productivity side of an organization is typically given in achievement terms. Not so for safety.

The only way to put an achievement spin on safety is to define proactive things to do for injury prevention and then hold people accountable for achieving

them. An achievement-based accountability system should put more focus on

positive consequences for accomplishment, from interpersonal recognition to

group celebrations. Plus, the safety scoring system should be based on

proactive measures – activities accomplished to prevent injury.

Imagine a safety meeting that begins with a presentation of various

process accomplishments for injury prevention, including the number of

a) environmental hazards removed, b) "near-miss" reports reviewed, c) safety

audits completed, d) interpersonal observation and feedback sessions

conducted, e) safety suggestions received and implemented, and f) percentage

of safe behaviors observed per work team.

Moreover, imagine the meeting facilitator asking participants to state

publicly what they have done for safety since the last meeting. Imagine also that

work teams are not ranked according to reactive injury records, but are

recognized for what they do to prevent personal injury. And, further imagine the

safety portion of a performance appraisal includes a checklist of safety

accomplishments rather than total recordable injury rate. With these transitions

from traditional safety, it's not difficult to imagine the cultivation of an

achievement orientation toward safety and a resultant increase in the number of

"safety success seekers".

In Conclusion

The bottom line of this presentation is not new. In fact, I've addressed the

need to develop an achievement orientation toward industrial safety in a number

of prior *ISHN* articles (see, for example, the Dec. 1990, Sept. 1993, Jan. 1995,

and Feb. 2002 issues). However, using a personality route to get to this critical

conclusion is new. I defined four basic person states relevant to individual

motivation, and then explained how only one of these states – success seeking –

facilitates appropriate involvement for injury prevention.

A recent experience illustrates my proposal. Midway through my safety

leadership presentation for NASA (at the Langley Airforce Base) my powerpoint

screen went blank. My immediate reaction was "What happened?" The

audience was silent as I attempted to solve the problem. As the computer

technician reached the front of the room, I noticed the power cord from my laptop

was not plugged in. The battery could support only the first 45 minutes of my

talk.

When I plugged in the power cord, the slide show started up immediately

at the very point it had stopped. The audience clapped enthusiastically. I

couldn't help but thank the audience for recognizing my success at solving a

problem. I also thanked them for not criticizing or complaining when the screen

went blank. Then I actually acknowledged the key point of this article. Wouldn't

it be nice if in safety we gave more attention to solving safety problems than to

reacting negatively after an injury occurs? If we did, we'd increase the number of

safety success seekers in our organization and come closer to achieving and

sustaining an injury-free workplace.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions help people develop,
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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. Also log on to www.spcoach.com to learn about an innovative internet approach to teaching these and other principles and procedures for improving the human dynamics of your workplace.