

Why We Don't Actively Care Enough: A Destructive Cycle of Self-Deception

The theme of my *ISHN* column last month was people-based safety. Referring to the soft-side of psychology, I explained the critical need to consider others as people with feelings rather than treating others as objects providing a means to an end. Without showing genuine feelings for others, applications of the best techniques to improve workplace attitudes and behaviors will fail.

People-Based Safety

For many years, I've claimed a comprehensive approach to address the human dynamics of industrial safety requires "people-based safety." This perspective combines the objective, research-supported tools of behavior-based safety (BBS) with person-based safety or the internal, feeling states of individuals. Actually, this people-based approach has been reflected in a majority of my *ISHN* contributions since 1990, whether the theme was effective communication, team-building, culture change, corrective action, values, interpersonal trust, mindfulness, self-persuasion, emotional intelligence, safety accountability, individual and group recognition, or discipline.

After submitting my July article on the soft side of psychology, I came across an intriguing book that was uncannily consistent with my key points last month. The title of this book is "Leadership and Self-Deception" by The Arbinger Institute (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc, 2002). This article reviews the key points in this book as they relate to people-based safety. I adapt the authors' notions about "self-betrayal" and "self-deception" to actively caring and injury prevention.

From Self-Betrayal to Self-Deception

The Arbinger Institute proposes that we often find ourselves in situations where we consider helping another person but don't follow through. For example, we observe an environmental hazard in a person's work area but don't remove it, or we see someone working without the proper safe-guards or personal protective equipment (PPE) and walk on by without doing anything about the perceived risk. Or, while buckled-up in a vehicle, we notice that another occupant is not using the available safety belt, but we don't say anything.

When our behavior is inconsistent with our attitudes or values, we experience tension (technically termed "cognitive dissonance"). We react to reduce this tension, as I explained in earlier *ISHN* articles (see for example *ISHN* January, 1996, and *ISHN* October, 2000). According to The Arbinger Institute this experience of not actively caring when you know you should leads to *self-betrayal*, and then to *self-deception*. Since it's uncomfortable to accept and maintain self-betrayal, we engage in a variety of self-deceiving thought processes to justify incidents that suggest we aren't living up to our expectations to help others in times of need.

To live with our self-betrayal, we inflate the faults of the person we didn't help while inflating our own virtues. For example, we might presume the worker not using proper PPE is incompetent, lazy, unmotivated, uncaring, or not a team player. At the same time, we pump up our own positive characteristics, including the qualities that make us effective at our important work. As a result, we conclude we have better things to do than to help an incompetent, mindless

worker decrease risks of personal injury. Besides, there are plenty of other people with more time and relevant expertise to help this person.

This last excuse goes beyond personal qualities and distorts our perception of the context in which the problem occurs. We misconstrue our perceptions of anything in the situation that provides potential justification for our self-betrayal. Our self-distorted world becomes “self-justifying” and leads to a premature cognitive commitment (see my *ISHN* article in September, 1999) that hinders subsequent opportunities to actively care for the safety and health of others.

Finding Faults Rather than Facts

Such distorted self-deception facilitates fault-finding over fact-finding, a common problem in the industrial-safety world. The easiest way to justify one’s self-betrayal or lack of actively caring is to attach blame to someone else. Thus, it’s not my fault for not helping, it’s their fault for not being responsible or self-accountable. The defensive personal script might be something like, “Safety is a personal issue. And, if those workers don’t care enough to protect themselves, why should I?”

Notice the self-serving cycle of distortion in fault finding. The more blame we connect to others, the less possible fault we find in ourselves. To reduce the tension from self-betrayal, we find the other person(s) blameworthy. This leads to more self-deception, feeding an already distorted reality. And, the possibility of experiencing feelings of self-betrayal in the future is diminished when the responsibility for actively caring is attributed to others.

Breaking the Cycle of Self-Serving Self-Deception

So what can we do about this universal problem? How can we break a cycle of self-serving self-deception that hinders actively caring? First, we need to recognize that we don't actively care for other's safety as much as we should and could. Then, we need to own up to personal misrepresentations of reality we hold in order to justify this self-betrayal. Third, we need to realize the power of seeing others as people with their own feelings, intentions, and aspirations rather than viewing these individuals as merely objects providing a service. When we embrace the human side of people with whom we interact daily, we are more likely to actively care for their well-being and less likely to practice self-deception to justify our self-betrayal.

So, after attempting to see others as people rather than objects, we should reflect on our self-deceptions about others. And we shouldn't look for these distortions of reality in others, because that will only fuel our own self-deceptions.

By apologizing for not actively caring and finding other opportunities to actively care and follow through, we break the cycle of self-serving self-deception. Thus, we should focus our mental scripts on what we do right rather than what we do wrong. This prevents feelings of self-betrayal and a need for self-deception.

Don't blame others for not actively caring. See these individuals as people with a variety of interpersonal and cultural constraints inhibiting their helping behavior. Then, set the actively-caring example yourself, thereby

showing you have overcome the personal and environmental factors that hold back actively caring behavior and facilitate self-betrayal and self-deception.

Bottom line: Take a people-based approach to industrial safety and health, and realize the power of empathy when listening, recognizing, helping, and leading people. Anything less will initiate a cycle of self-deception which distorts perceptions of people, confines the benefits from interpersonal interaction, and makes it impossible to bring out the best in people and achieve an injury-free workplace.

In Conclusion

If only we could all view our organization as a family of people working together to achieve common goals. We see our own family members as people, and we never hesitate to actively care for their safety and health. Any self-distortion regarding our view of individual family members occurs in the positive direction. That is, we inflate the virtues of those in our family and we often communicate these virtues to others. Such “positive gossip” increases appreciation, admiration, and positive regard for those involved, making it natural to actively care for their safety every day.

Thus, actively caring behavior in an organization increases directly with the number of employees (including managers) who view their coworkers as “family.” We show empathy for family members, we don’t betray family members, and any distortions of the qualities of family members are more likely to be positive than negative. People-based safety enables us to successively approximate a family atmosphere in the workplace.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions teach organizations how to combine behavior-based safety with the soft side of psychology in order to achieve and maintain an injury-free workplace. For more information 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.