

Yield the Right-of-Way: A Most Important Resolution for the New Year

Happy New Year! Another festive and hectic holiday season ends, and we get one more fresh start. We can decide to improve in certain ways and set some performance-improvement goals. We might call these “New Year’s Resolutions,” but for such commitment statements to be effective guides and motivators, they need to be SMART.

My *ISHN* contribution back in September 1994 defined SMART goals with “S” for specific, “M” for motivational, “A” for achievable, “R” for recordable, and “T” for trackable. These days, I use “R” for relevant, since a trackable goal must be recordable. And believing a goal is relevant for some ultimate vision or mission statement is critical for personal commitment and ongoing motivation.

I’d like to suggest a resolution for 2003 – yield the right -of -way. My proposition is quite general, applicable in many circumstances, and relevant to more than a safety mission. I hope to convince you that this resolution is a SMART goal, worthy of every reader’s consideration.

Behaviors related to “yielding the right -of -way” can be stipulated, and occurrences of these behaviors can be tracked until a specific and achievable quantity is reached. Therefore, this New Year’s Resolution is within everyone’s capability to achieve. But why should you do this? And, how is doing this relevant to safety?

These two questions address the “motivation” and “relevant” components of SMART goals, respectively. Compelling answers should give this simple

resolution a top priority for the new year. Let's first consider the domain typically viewed as most germane to my proposal – driving.

The Leading Contributor to a Vehicle Crash

Several years ago the Transportation Research Center at the University of Michigan conducted a comprehensive analysis of more than 1.8 million crash reports in order to prioritize the various contributing driving behaviors. For more than 79% of these reports, only one at-risk behavior was recorded. Indeed, “failure-to-yield” was at the top of the list (accounting for 19.3% of the total crashes), followed by speeding (16.9%), following-too-close (10.3%), driver inattention (6.6%), careless driving (5.8%), and disregarding a traffic signal (at 5.0%). Alcohol or drugs was mentioned in only 3.2% of these crash reports.

Although this analysis was conducted a little more than a decade ago, my guess is the hierarchy of behavioral factors is not much different today. At least, failure-to-yield is still a prominent contributor to vehicle crashes. After all, a driver who yields the right-of-way usually avoids any possible conflict with another vehicle. Also, when you let the aggressive driver through, you'll prevent the frustration and negative emotions that can activate “road rage.” In some cases a sense of security is gained by knowing a speedy driver is ahead to attract the attention of a radar check.

Listen First

This proposition for a priority New Year's Resolution is consistent with the first rule of effective interpersonal communication. In fact, I addressed this issue in a number of previous *ISHN* articles, including presentations on behavior-based coaching (March 2000), safety conversation for commitment (April 1996, October 1999, February 2000), incident analysis (February & December 1999), safety leadership (June 1999), teamwork (October & December 1998), trust (April 1998), error prevention (December 1997), and strategies for safety recognition (January 1997) and celebration (February 1997).

This list of applications of this simple principle could be much longer, but I'm sure you get my point. Listen actively in one-on-one conversation to obtain the other person's perspective before trying to sell your own.

When attempting to change at-risk behavior to safe behavior, listen first with empathy to the wrongdoer's position, even when it sounds like only an excuse. Then ask specific behavior-based questions to learn more. Such yielding can lead to an optimum outcome, as when the offender admits to making a personal mistake and yields for your advice on how to improve.

Don't Snap Back

Listening patiently can be extremely difficult when someone says something unpleasant or unkind. For example, the other day when the telephone rang and my daughter shouted with hostility, "Someone answer the phone; you live here too don't you?" Now that kind of negative reaction seems to demand an

equally unpleasant reply, like “Answer the phone yourself, it’s probably for you anyway.” But what benefit could such a reaction bring?

Sometimes the best response to inappropriate talk is no response. Yielding provides an opportunity for speakers to reflect on what they said. And, the absence of a negative rejoinder prevents the escalation of negative emotions that naturally accompany an exchange of combative verbal behaviors. In other words, don’t fuel a fire and inflame negativity.

Yielding is Not Ignoring

My example above is mild and insignificant. It was only about answering a telephone. Yielding was easy. I merely yelled back a genuine “Sorry,” and answered the phone, leaving my daughter to think about her inappropriate assertion. Actually, I hoped my yielding to “Sorry” would activate some guilt feelings.

I resisted asking my daughter why she seemed so hostile or moody. I surmised that calling unnecessary attention to such trivial talk would only lead to nonproductive and negative conversation. Recognizing a negative statement often provides opportunity and fuel for more negative statements.

Sure, this yielding stuff sounds good for inconsequential behavior. But what about significant action, such as at-risk behaviors that can result in an injury if continued? Surely you can’t yield the right-of-way in this situation. Well, it depends on your definition of “yield.”

“Yield” is not the same as ignore. A definition of “yield” in *The American Heritage Dictionary* is “to give way to what is stronger or better.” At-risk behavior

is not better or stronger than safe behavior, so there's no reason to yield. But remember my earlier point about first actively listening and asking questions. Realize that "punishment" (defined in my dictionary as "a penalty imposed for wrongdoing") is not the same as "corrective action."

Corrective Action is Not Punishment

Corrective action requires the development of a specific refinement plan. This includes a designation of behaviors to change, as well as the environmental, managerial, and social supports needed to initiate and sustain behavioral improvement. Effective corrective action also requires personal commitment, and this can be stifled severely with an unyielding and seemingly uncaring application of negative consequences (see my *ISHN* article in November 1997 for more undesirable effects of punishment).

Bottom line: Yield the right-of-way does not mean ignore at-risk behavior. Ask for an immediate behavior change, but resist giving critical commentary. Instead, listen with genuine caring and ask questions relevant for corrective action. When you yield to learning the other person's perspective, you maximize the chances of attaining the best outcomes – ownership of the mistake and commitment to improve.

In Conclusion

This paper presented a case for a 2003 New Year's Resolution with numerous applications and advantages. It is much easier to advocate "yield the right-of-way" than to actually do it. Nevertheless, this guideline is achievable by every reader, and successes at accomplishing this behavioral code are trackable

per relevant situation. Hoping to motivate readers to adopt this resolution, I discussed specific advantages in doing so.

Please note how this simple proposal fits the five criteria for SMART goals. Actually, you should use these criteria to define and develop all of your resolutions for the new year. When you make your improvement goals Specific, Motivational, Achievable, Relevant, and Trackable you greatly enhance the probability you will actually improve. Here's to actualization of all your New Year's Resolutions!

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor and Director
Center for Applied Behavior Systems
Virginia Tech

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions help work teams set SMART goals relevant for injury prevention. 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.