

How to Enhance the Benefit of a Corrective Action Conversation: A True Story

Sunday evening, May 16th, I received a very rewarding phone call from a long-time friend and colleague -- Mike Hedlesky. For almost a year Mike has been managing the construction of my log lodge, so we have frequent phone conversations. However, this phone call was different. Before giving me a progress report, Mike thanked me for possibly saving his life. He told me about his freak bicycle crash earlier that day.

He was traveling about 25 miles per hour when the rear wheel broke away from the frame. Mike sailed over the handle bars and hit the road head first. It happened so fast that he didn't even have time to put his hands forward to break his fall. Mike's face was painfully bruised, but imagine how serious his injuries might have been if he had not been wearing a bicycle helmet. Mike claimed that he put the helmet on that day because of me -- thus the reason for the "thank you."

Two weeks earlier I observed Mike biking on a country road without a helmet. He was wearing a cowboy hat instead. There were no other vehicles on the road, so I came up beside him to say "hello." We both stopped our vehicles for a brief conversation. After exchanging friendly words, I said I was surprised to see that he was not wearing a bike helmet. Then I reminded him of a bicycle crash I had two years earlier in which my bike helmet probably saved my life. I also remarked that his girlfriend who was riding a bike about 50 yards behind him was protected with a bike helmet.

Mike told me he thought about that conversation when he and his girlfriend embarked on a bike ride the Sunday of his crash. As a result, he wore a bike helmet that day. And that protective behavior may well have saved his life. I believe five

aspects of that conversation gave it the impact it needed. Perhaps you see their relevance in your corrective action conversations with friends, coworkers, or family members.

1. Behavior-Focused and Caring

I did not criticize Mike for not using a bike helmet. Our conversation was friendly and not confrontational. Within the context of our friendship and my caring demeanor, my remarks about safety were accepted. I didn't admonish Mike for not being safe, nor did I tell him to comply with a safety rule. Instead, I only indicated surprise that he was not practicing a particular safe act. This approach created conflict or dissonance between personal values and overt behavior.

2. Inconsistency Implicated Between Value and Behavior

When I noted a discrepancy between what I expected from Mike and his biking behavior, I may have created conflict or dissonance between internal value and external behavior. In other words, I suggested that Mike was not the kind of person who would ride a bicycle without using the proper protective equipment. If Mike recognized an inconsistency between his safety values and his behavior in this situation, he felt some internal pressure to resolve the discrepancy. Perhaps this inconsistency was made more salient when I pointed out that his girlfriend was wearing a bike helmet.

3. Acknowledge Peer Support for the Desired Behavior

Reminding Mike that his biking partner was wearing a protective helmet probably did more than increase perceived inconsistency between personal values and behavior. It drove home the fact that the safe behavior is practiced by others. In this case a

significant other. And when his partner put on her bike helmet that critical Sunday, Mike followed her example and resolved any inconsistency he might have noted.

When safe behavior is viewed as the norm, we have the basic principle of consensus or social conformity on our side. However, when desired behavior is not practiced by the majority, as is the case with bike-helmet use, it can be particularly useful to note specific occurrences of the safe practice. Sometimes a single case study is persuasive, because it provides for a clear example to follow. It also allows for the formation of a supportive mental image that can be both directional and motivational.

4. Use Personal Testimony for Persuasion

In that critical conversation, I reminded Mike of my bicycle crash and how a bike helmet might have saved my life. I had told him the gory details two years earlier, soon after the crash. Perhaps my brief mentioning of that earlier incident provided Mike with an image that influenced his decision to use a bike helmet thereafter.

So why is personal testimony so influential? Well, it's personal and it's real. Listeners can visualize themselves in a similar situation. They can form a mental image of the event and relevant behavior. Later they can retrieve that image for personal direction and motivation. In an *ISHN* article last year (July, 1998), I introduced mental imagery as a self-management technique, and discussed the need to develop a work culture where individual testimonials about personal injuries and "near misses" are promoted and appreciated, and they can be catalysts for safety improvement plans.

5. Be A Credible Source

A personal testimony is also influential because it's credible. After all it's a description of a real experience. And if the testimony includes an example of the safe

behavior, the source is credible as an advocate of the desired behavior. Thus, my bicycle story not only illustrated that dangerous bike crashes can happen and bike helmets prevent serious injury, it also made me credible as an advocate of bike helmet use.

On several occasions, Mike has seen me before or after one of my biking sessions, and every time I was wearing a bike helmet. Thus, my consistent use of this protective device gives me credibility as an advocate of helmet use when biking. Thus, to be consistent with their message and to be a credible source of safety information, safety leaders are obligated to always set the safe example.

In Conclusion

Safety leaders spend significant time and energy persuading others to follow certain safety precautions. And usually the safe behavior they advise is more inconvenient or less efficient than the at-risk alternative. Furthermore, it's rare that the safe behavior results in a clear benefit in terms of injury prevention. And, those who continue at-risk behavior in spite of your admonitions usually complete their tasks unscathed.

Once in awhile taking a leadership role in behavior-based safety pays off big. Whenever a serious injury is obviously prevented by proactive intervention, the episode needs to be shared through personal testimony. This enables the spread of a consequence that can support similar safe behavior and safety leadership on a large scale. This was a primary purpose of this article.

I also took this opportunity to specify five qualities of corrective action dialogue that can enhance its beneficial impact. Specifically, the likelihood that a safety

recommendation will result in long-term behavior change in the absence of external monitoring increases when: 1) it is behavior-focused and reflects actively caring, 2) it implicates inconsistency between an internal value and overt behavior, 3) it acknowledges peer support of the desired behavior, 4) it includes personal testimony, and 5) it comes from a credible source -- from people who practice what they preach.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor, Virginia Tech
Senior Partner
Safety Performance Solutions

NOTE: Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) teach techniques for increasing the beneficial impact of safety-related conversations. Please call SPS at (540) 951-7233 or log on to our web site at www.safetyperformance.com to learn more about the books, manuals, videotapes, audiotapes, seminars, and consulting services offered by SPS for achieving a Total Safety Culture.