

PEOPLE-BASED SAFETY™

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On March 13, 1964, one of the twentieth century's most famous crimes occurred in a place called Kew Gardens, New York. A woman named Kitty Genovese had driven home in the early morning and parked her car about 130 meters from her apartment. While walking to her apartment, she was approached by a man and stabbed. Genovese screamed out and her cries were heard by several neighbours, one of whom yelled out to the attacker 'leave that girl alone!' (Rosenthal 1999).

The attacker ran away, and she managed to get to her feet and slowly make her way to her apartment. Sadly, the man returned, attacked, and eventually killed Kitty Genovese over the course of the next half an hour.

When police began investigating the crime, they discovered that some 38 witnesses had seen, or heard, parts of the attack. Only one witness had called the police, a few minutes after the attack finished. When the story was reported in the New York Times, under the headline "Thirty-Eight Who Saw Murder Didn't Call the Police", the article began;

"For more than half an hour thirty-eight respectable, law abiding citizens in Queens watched a killer stalk and stab a woman in three separate attacks." (Gansberg, 1964)

THE BYSTANDER EFFECT

The article was somewhat exaggerated, as no individual had witnessed the whole attack. Nevertheless, it triggered a huge public outcry and led to research and investigation into what became known as the 'bystander effect'.

The more people who are present in a situation where an individual needs help, the less likely those people are to intervene (Darley and Latane 1968). For example, if a person who is alone witnesses another person lying on the street, they are more likely to help than if they were in a crowd.

Why would reasonable people not help when someone is clearly in trouble? The most common explanation is that they believe that someone else will intervene. Or perhaps, since everyone else is behaving normally, there isn't really a problem (Gladwell 2000). People may also risk losing face in front of other bystanders if their assistance is unwanted or someone else could do a 'better job'. Or perhaps it's just someone else's problem. As one witness to Kitty Genovese's assault told police, "I didn't want to get involved" (Rosenthal 1999).

ACTIVELY CARING

Most people value their own safety and the safety of those around them. But values, intentions and behaviours aren't always consistent. Organisations that value safety want people to actively care by moving beyond simply caring about others to acting

on their sense of responsibility. Unfortunately, we don't actively care for other people's safety as much as we should and could (Geller 2005).

While there are external factors that contribute to whether we will actively care, there are also a number of things that vary from person to person. If people are empowered, feel in control, have high self esteem and feel that they are part of a team, they will be more likely to engage in actively caring behaviours. We can influence these by focussing on people's own feelings, intentions, knowledge, aspirations.

PEOPLE-BASED SAFETY™

In the last decade or so, many Australian organisations have recognised that good safety performance rests on more than just safety systems. They have focussed on the 'softer' aspects of safety by adopting 'behavioural safety.' More often than not, this involves some form of observation and feedback process that targets the observable behaviours of people at work.

A lot of these organisations have achieved considerable success with these processes. But few have succeeded in building a culture where everyone has embraced the principles. The impediment has often been organisation's inability to motivate and involve every member of the team, especially operational employees.

People-Based Safety™ offers a solution to this problem. It combines the tools of behaviour-based safety with a focus on people and their internal states. While behavioural tools focus on how people work and what we can observe, we need to also consider people's own moods, personalities, experience, intentions and aspirations (Geller 2005).

Systems	Behaviour	People
Processes and procedures	Actions	Motivations
Instructing	Observing	Coaching
Managing	Managing	Leading
Informing	Consulting	Joint problem solving
Compliant employees	Safe employees	Engaged employees

Table 1: Building blocks of an effective safety culture

ACTS

Dr E. Scott Geller (2005) has developed four basic principles to give people a framework of tools and skills to use People-Based Safety™ - Acting, Coaching, Thinking and Seeing (ACTS). While these principles are easy to talk about, they are harder to manage. Building a great safety culture takes commitment, time and hard work. It relies on leaders and managers who understand these principles, demonstrate them through their own actions and teach and empower their employees to use them.

ACTING

The first element is Acting. Whether in safety training, coaching, incident analysis or incentives, we should focus on people's behaviour. Unlike discussions about attitudes, feelings or intentions, we can be objective and impersonal about people's behaviours. If we see a colleague performing an at-risk behaviour, we can talk about that person's behaviour without criticising or questioning who they are as a person.

There are three types of behaviour. The first is when we follow someone else's instructions, or 'other-directed' behaviour. For example, following road-signs, written work procedures or directives from our boss. After a while, this behaviour becomes 'self-directed' when we've learned to guide ourselves. Eventually, some behaviours become automatic or habitual.

'Other-directed' behaviour is useful because it helps to make people aware of risks and how to manage them. For example, we need to train people in the safe way of using mobile equipment, rather than expect them to learn on their own.

Unfortunately, when behaviour is 'other-directed', it does not always occur if there aren't external pressures to perform the behaviour. The classic example is a construction crew who wear all their Personal Protective Equipment when a manager is on site, but take it off as soon as the manager leaves. They are clearly wearing the equipment to avoid being criticised or reprimanded, rather than wearing it because they see the value for themselves.

To build a great safety culture, we need to help people move from other-directed behaviour to self-directed, safe behaviour. In other words, facilitating a transition from safety accountability - "I'm working safely because someone is holding me accountable" - to safety responsibility - "I'm working safely because I'm holding myself accountable" (Geller 2005).

This can be achieved, for instance, by increasing people's feelings of empowerment by giving people opportunities for personal choice. For example, one of Chevron's core values is that 'There is always time to do a job safely.' People are trained to think before acting and proceed only if they are trained, protected, have a plan and are in the right state of mind. This is actively supported by leaders and managers within the organisation. It gives Chevron's employees and contractors the opportunity to stop and consider before starting work and, if they are not happy to proceed, the power to stop the job.

Another way to increase safety responsibility is to hold people accountable only for the numbers they can control. Many organisations reward their employees if there is a period of injury-free performance. However, injury performance is partly out of the control of individuals and relies upon good planning and support from management, appropriate and well maintained equipment and effective safety systems. More effective individual or team performance goals could be hazards identified and controlled or safety interactions conducted, all of which are within people's personal control.

COACHING

Many organisations introduce behavioural observation and feedback or safety interaction processes. When done well, they provide opportunities for people to engage with one another in problem solving discussions about safety. When done badly, they become a chore, or worse, a confrontation.

The common reason safety interaction processes sometimes fail is that their core purpose is not fulfilled and interactions move away from coaching people. Training in the process becomes mechanistic, and more about completing a form than about communication skills. Worse, employees may not be trained at all. People who do not see the value in the process will do them only to meet quotas. A common example of this is the 'drive by' interaction, where a person sits in his vehicle watching employees outside, fills out his form, and drives off.

Interpersonal communication is the critical intervention step of safety coaching (Geller 2005). While safety interactions are not the only opportunity for people to coach one another at work, they're a good place to start. When coaching someone, the key objectives are to facilitate a conversation, give constructive feedback and help the person to improve safety.

A good technique is to begin by asking questions. By requesting someone's advice, help or input, we build their self esteem by emphasising the value of their skills, knowledge and experience. A good open ended question will stimulate thought and discussion. For example:

“What are the hazards in the work you're doing?”

“What would happen if something went wrong?”

“What things could you do to improve your safety on this job?”

There's no point in asking questions if we don't actively listen to the response. Managers, supervisors and engineers all face similar problems in that they're expected to be the experts in their jobs. When they see a safety problem in the workplace, the temptation is to immediately offer solutions. If we coach the other person through problem solving and help them to come up with their own solutions, they will feel personal ownership and responsibility. Together we explore the problem to understand the issues, generate some possible solutions, and agree on an appropriate path forward.

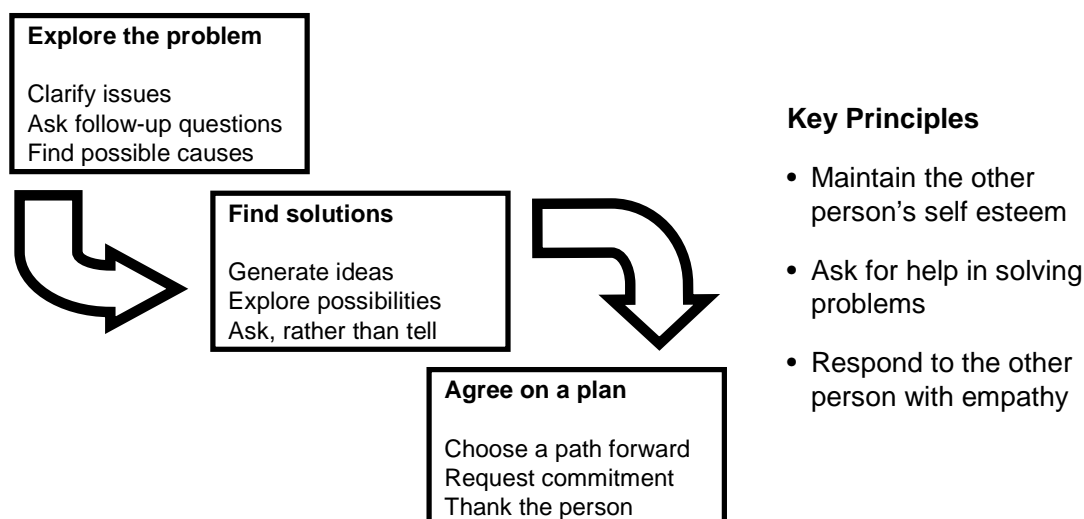


Figure 1: A coaching conversation

Safety becomes a negative experience if it is always about compliance and being 'caught out' for doing the wrong thing. While it's tempting to try to build a team of perfect people who always work in the 'best way', in reality this will never happen. On the other hand, everyone has their own strengths and we should reinforce these (Buckingham and Coffman 1999).

It's worthwhile making a habit of giving people praise when they are working safely or have done something exceptional to improve safety. It may be as simple as saying 'thank you'. I've often been told that, in the Australian work culture, people will think you are insincere if you praise them too often. But I've never met someone who is sick and tired of getting too much praise at work.

THINKING

Mindless thinking is a real barrier to improving safety culture. As anyone involved in safety knows, many incidents occur because people are not thinking about the task at hand and are working on 'autopilot'. How often have we heard the statement "I've always done it this way and I've never been hurt"? The thinking component of People-Based Safety™ refers to two things, mindfulness and the risks that arise when we turn our minds off to safety (Geller 2005).

One way to describe mindlessness is 'premature cognitive commitment' (Langer 1989). In other words, we commit ourselves to an impression or to doing something without the benefit of first thinking critically. This is dangerous because people can:

- Become prejudiced against groups of people ("contractors always take short cuts")
- Be biased against beneficial change or new initiatives ("it's just another program")
- Jump to conclusions about incidents ("that person's just careless")

An effective way to increase mindfulness is to get people to think more about how they are trying to accomplish a task, as opposed to focusing only on the outcome of that task (Geller 2005).

Many organisations come to the realisation that they lack written work procedures for many of the key tasks performed in the workplace. The temptation is to get an expert to come in and fill the gap by writing these work procedures. Unfortunately, while the work procedures may be accurate and comprehensive, they will probably have little ownership by the people who use them. Instead, by involving operational employees in the design and use of work procedures, they can become 'live' documents that are built on the skills and experience of our own teams and that get people to actively think about working safely. For example, Caltex's highly successful driver safety program was designed by a team of company drivers who understood the work and were passionate about eliminating incidents.

Too many external safety controls can make people complacent about safety, or reduce their ownership and personal responsibility. Instead of always people what to do to remain safe, balance this by giving people the knowledge, understanding, tools and resources to understand how to improve safety themselves and the opportunity to implement their own initiatives.

SEEING

The Seeing part of People-Based Safety is about our ability to perceive personal risk. Our perception has a big impact on how we respond to a risk. In a work environment with many visible safety controls, our risk perception can fool us into thinking that there are no risks at all.

When we first visit a workplace, we may be in a state of "hyper perception" caused by anxiety about a new work environment (Geller 2005). This benefits safety, as we are more likely to see hazards and account for them in how we act. As we spend longer in a work environment, however, we tend to pay less and less attention to hazards and adjust our behaviour accordingly. Risks that are more familiar provoke less concern (Sandman 1987).

To improve people's perception of hazards, we might have to overcome 'groupthink'. Groupthink is a false sense of consensus where everyone always agrees with one another and a team thinks it can do no wrong. Symptoms of groupthink are that people may feel pressure to conform, disregard warnings, and not carefully consider decisions (Janus 1982).

Groupthink often occurs when teams are completing risk assessments. In order to complete the paperwork and 'get on with the job', the team will write down a list of typical risks associated with the job. Unfortunately, they might not take the time to see hazards that are unique to a particular day or a particular site. Effective leaders can overcome this by encouraging people to actively seek out hazards, question the status quo and discuss improvements as a group.

Another area to focus on is incident investigations. In investigations, the temptation is to find a single root cause. Unfortunately, the 'root cause' analysis often leads to a single person being found responsible for the incident. Because of this, operational employees often want no part of incident investigations. In reality, incidents have multiple contributing factors in terms of environmental, behavioural

and personal factors. By adopting a frank and open dialogue, we can focus on searching for safer ways to work, rather than scapegoats. Search for a variety of people's input and different perspectives, rather than a single root cause.

CONCLUSION

At times, the complexity of safety can be overwhelming. Between complicated safety management systems, legislation, regulations, new research, tools and products, it can be difficult to know the right things to do to improve safety. The solution is to focus on your people. Include everyone in the organisation in building a safer workplace, from the most senior management to operational employees. Don't overwhelm them - choose a few key elements, drive them hard and do it in the right way.

Building strong safety performance has benefits well beyond reducing the numbers of injuries. Improvement in safety impacts on a company's culture and on the attitudes its people. The outcome is a shared sense of initiative, teamwork, cooperation, loyalty and commitment. Morale is lifted, and so is business performance.

The principles of People-Based Safety™ are practical ways to drive improvements in an organisation's safety culture. While they sound simple, adopting the principles may mean challenging old ways of working and entrenched ways of thinking. This starts with leadership. If leaders are visible in the workplace and have regular, meaningful engagements with their people, the workforce will start to realise that safety is a genuine value.

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