

Men & Women Behaving Badly Within Industry

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Men & Woman Behaving Badly in Industry

Over the past 5 – 8 years, the number of deaths in Industry has remained fairly static; however, in the last 12 -18 months, we have seen a sudden rise in Serious Harm incidents in industry that leave Safety Professionals asking the question, 'Why is this happening in the face of so much publicity and education on safety over the last 15 + years?'

Within the field of occupational safety and health, many efforts have been made to improve safety in the workplace. These efforts have focused upon legislation, engineering failure, safety awareness campaigns, safety training and unsafe acts. Taken as a whole, these efforts have not always been successful in impacting upon accident rates. Traditionally, the legislative approach has not made much of an impact, simply because the resources necessary to police the situation have not always been forthcoming.

Engineering approaches have typically focused on the 'designing out' of the possibility of accident occurrences by, for example, providing guards on machinery, etc. Although a useful route to pursue, this approach has often been based on a re-active process founded on somewhat misleading perceptions of accident causation, and typically does not take into account the effects of rapidly changing technologies.

Similarly, safety training has been one of the fundamental methods for improving safety, based in part on the implicit assumption that safety training in itself is a good thing and that those who know what to do will automatically conduct themselves in a safe manner for extended periods of time. Clearly this has not been the case. Despite the notion that safety training will cure most ills in regard to accidents, evidence exists showing that it is not always effective – which may be related to the variability of the quality of training given.

SO.....'Why have all the above approaches not been as successful as they could have been?'

Part of the answer resides in the fact that both safety training and safety campaigns concentrate upon changing people's attitudes,.....

Similarly, both the engineering and legislative approaches are based on the assumption that influencing the situation will influence people's behaviour.

To some extent this is correct, but it is not the whole picture. In my view, these approaches have only gone part of the way down the road.

It is an accepted fact that with incidents and accidents, they don't 'JUST HAPPEN' – they are CAUSED – and often the greater majority of the causes come back to the human factor.

As safety professionals we believe ALL accidents involving human beings are preventable! But therein lies the problem, we have little or no control **over that human factor** – sometimes referred to as the ‘Idiot Factor’! There is always someone who thinks they can take a short cut or not follow documented procedures, and then before you know it, they’re a statistic.

1, As an example, there is the bloke who cut a hole in the microwave oven door in the smoko room at work to stir his mug of coffee as it turned around.

2, Or what about the builder who, when his nailing gun failed to activate on the job site where he was building a house did something that can only inspire wonder. He peered down the barrel and tried the trigger again, at the same time he manipulated the safety plate! This time it worked!

3, The chef at a resort lost a finger in a meat-cutting machine - and after a little hopping around – submitted a claim to his insurance company. The insurance company – suspecting negligence – sent one of its men out to investigate. He tried the machine out and.....lost a finger! Needless to say, the chef’s claim was approved.

The one thing they all have in common is an unacceptable safety behaviour.

This is something that has developed over time and is pretty much a cultural atmosphere that has been allowed to develop in the face of strong economic growth, as companies try to squeeze the maximum productivity while reducing overheads to remain competitive in an ever changing monetary climate.

Unfortunately, this squeeze on companies has impacted on safety behaviour and is a very real problem that needs addressing now if we want to see in an improvement in the amount of serious harm incidents within industry.

What initiatives are underway to improve the OHS situation? –

Many safety systems have been developed to improve safety and keep it a high priority in the minds of all who work in the high risk industries such as the Forestry, Construction and Manufacturing industries.

We get to a point where we have done all we can do and, at the end of the day, it’s up to us as individuals – we have got to WANT to work safely. “It’s a state of mind”

This is the next phase of an improved safety culture – to understand the psychology of behavioural safety. To do this we need to ask three cardinal questions –

- 1) Why don’t people behave safely?
- 2) How can we stop unsafe behaviour? and
- 3) What’s in it for me? (W I I FM)

People often behave unsafely because they have never been hurt before while doing their job in an unsafe way: 'We've always done the job this way' – 'The Donkey Syndrome' so why change.

We also find the continuation of unsafe behaviours being supported by more than one reinforcer. Some will exert stronger effects on people's behaviour than others.

Smokers, for example, find it hard to stop because the consequences of smoking are soon (immediate), certain (every time) and positive (a nicotine top-up); whereas the negative consequences (eg, lung cancer) are late (some years away) and uncertain (not every smoker contracts or dies of lung cancer).

In exactly the same way, employees will find it hard to follow certain safety rules and procedures if they are consistently (certain) rewarded by an immediate (soon) time saving that achieves extra production (positive) by behaving unsafely.

An example a little closer to home would be – What would you do if you were faced with a ten to fifteen minute period to put on the correct clothing and equipment to enter a mandatory PPE area to read a gauge that only takes 10 seconds?

In some instances, the actual workflow process also reinforces people's unsafe behaviour. By way of example, Mill maintenance workers were required to replenish oil on faulty hydraulic equipment each time it shut down for any reason.

Maintenance personnel were required to tag out each time they worked on the machinery. Unfortunately, the delay in having appropriate equipment on site meant repair to this equipment was delayed by some months. To ensure ongoing production and the potential loss of bonuses, tag out procedures were often overlooked, especially on night shift crews.

This particular unsafe behaviour had the potential to injure both maintenance staff and operators. Nevertheless, it soon became part of the maintenance staff's normal way of working, because their behaviour was always (certain) reinforced immediately (soon) by getting their job done (positive) to maintain production volume.

Unsafe behaviour is sometimes further reinforced by line managers turning a blind eye or actively encouraging employees to take short-cuts for the sake of production and bonuses much in the same way LTIFR are linked to KPI's for which bonuses are paid.

Unfortunately, this has negative effects that are not always immediately apparent. First – employees learn that unsafe behaviour pays; second – it wastes resources as the very behaviours that companies spend a lot of time, money and effort trying to eradicate, are reinforced; and, third, by condoning

unsafe behaviour, line managers are transmitting conflicting messages that undermines employee confidence in the whole of management's commitment to safety.

So the next question is, 'How do we stop unsafe behaviour?'

Eliminating hazards by engineering them out or introducing physical controls can be an effective way of limiting the potential for unsafe behaviour.

While successful in many instances, it does not always work. Simply because people have the capacity to behave unsafely and override any engineering controls.

Clearly, despite the presence of the machine guards, operators often believe that the consequences of behaving unsafely will be more than repaid by continued production. This illustrates the point that many engineering solutions tend to be reliant on people's '**rule following**' behaviour (eg, stopping the machinery before removing guards), but people still have the capacity to ignore them and behave unsafely.

So it's not hard to see that it comes down to the workers' attitude to safety. Comments on accident reports often say, '*So-and-so should take more care. With better attitudes and safety awareness, this accident would not have happened.*' Where this occurs, attempts to change unsafe behaviour usually hinge upon the belief that attitudes determine behaviour. (Indeed, this is a very common opinion amongst safety professionals)

Although positive safety attitudes are important and very desirable, the link from attitude change to behaviour change is very weak.

Fortunately, the link from behaviour change to attitude change is much stronger.

If people consciously change their behaviour, they also tend to re-adjust their associated attitudes and belief systems to fit the new behaviour.

An additional factor that enhances attitude change by focussing on behaviour is the positive reinforcement brought about by peer pressure. Psychologists have known for some time that a group membership demands conformity to the group's behavioural and attitudinal 'norms'. If a workgroup adopts the 'norm' that 'thinking and behaving safely' is best for all concerned, the group, as a whole, will tend to apply social 'sanctions' to the individual who deviates from this 'norm' and behaves unsafely. If people wish to remain a part of the social fabric of the workgroup, they soon revert back to the safety norm and behave safely. Importantly, this illustrates the point that workgroups will adopt a collective definition of those behaviours, work practices or tasks that are considered to be risky. This fact lies at the very heart of behavioural safety, simply because its essence is to help workgroups positively re-define their own safety-related 'norms'.

So, what about punishment? The way this is achieved – in practice, however – can lead to positive or negative effects. Some approaches to safety management are heavily reliant on the use of authority, fear and punishment (i.e. if you do not behave in a safe manner at work, you could be reprimanded, fined, or even dismissed)

These approaches emphasise the use of discipline and punishment to discourage unsafe behaviour, while safe behaviour is largely ignored. This often results in the opposite to what was intended (eg, accident or near-miss incidents are not reported for fear of sanctions). Although the judicious use of discipline and punishment can have the intended effects, more often not, it doesn't. The reason for this is quite simple – the effectiveness of punishment is dependent upon its consistency. It only works if it is given immediately, and EVERY SINGLE TIME an unsafe behaviour occurs. It is self-evident that punishing someone every time they behave unsafely is a very difficult thing to do, simply because they will not always be seen to do so by those in authority. This means that the multitude of soon, certain and positive reinforcers gained from behaving unsafely will tend to outweigh any uncertain, late, negative reinforcers received from inconsistent punishment.

In fact, the opposite is true. Praise is the key to workplace safety. It is a fact that most people tend to respond more to praise and social approval than any other factor. Think, if you will, of people smoking their first cigarette. This normally occurs during the teenage years because it is seen as the 'thing' to do. Although the cigarette smoke tastes foul and causes severe coughing, people will continue to suffer the discomfort if the cigarette smoking behaviour meets with their peer group's approval. Likewise, some people may not use PPE or follow a procedure at work because of their colleague's disapproval – i.e. it goes against the workgroup's 'macho' image. It makes sense, therefore, to make use of the phenomenon and praise people for behaving safely (something very rarely done!) to bring about the required changes. Crucially, the effect of this is to explicitly link the desired safe behaviour to the praise received. Once the required behaviour pattern starts to become established, the timing and frequency of the praise and social approval can be reduced over a period of time, i.e. it doesn't need to be given immediately and every single time that someone is seen to be behaving safely. Additional benefits include the strengthening of a positive safety culture due to increased trust and confidence between line managers and the workforce.

We know that focussing on people's safety behaviour will bring about the desired changes and that attitude changes follow behavioural changes. We know that social approval and encouragement can bring about positive changes in safety 'norms'. We also know that the workforce are the best people to re-define their safety 'norms', as they control their own behaviour. It follows, therefore, that any safety improvement initiative which relies almost exclusively on line management's efforts, is less likely to be as successful as one that empowers and enables the workforce itself. Accordingly, behavioural safety approaches are

very much driven and shaped by the workforce, in conjunction with line management. In this way, the workforce is given responsibility and authority for

identifying, defining and monitoring their own safe and unsafe behaviours, as well as setting their own 'safety improvement targets'. As a result, workgroups are able to re-define their own safety related 'norms' in an enabling atmosphere. Line management facilitate this process by providing the necessary resources and support to encourage 'employee ownership of safety', while also stressing that no individual will be identified or disciplined as a result of the monitoring. In this way, a 'blame-free' pro-active safety culture is created that is so vital for long-term success.

Thus, behavioural safety has a lot to offer to the world of work, although it must be stressed that it is not a panacea to cure all ills.

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