Communication Strategies
for Achieving a Total Safety Culture

Employers need to overcome the perception that giving safety-related feedback creates interpersonal conflict.

By Josh Williams, Ph.D., and E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.

One of the most effective ways to improve a safety culture and prevent injuries is to optimize safety-related communication throughout an organization (Williams, 2003). Unfortunately, employees often fail to "speak up" when they observe risky behaviors even when they know they should.

The Safety Culture Survey administered to hundreds of organizations by Safety Performance Solutions Inc. (SPS) indicates 90 percent of respondents believe employees should caution others when they're operating at-risk. However, only 60 percent say they actually do provide this critical feedback.

During training and structured interviews, we ask employees why there's such a gap between people's values ("should caution") and actual behaviors ("do caution"). Participants respond that giving safety-related feedback will create interpersonal conflict, indicating, "It's not our job to give safety feedback." Also, they often do not feel competent at giving safety feedback or they don't want to insult coworkers who have more experience (Geller & Williams, 2001).

It is unfortunate employees are reluctant to warn coworkers when they observe risky behaviors, especially considering that most injuries have a behavioral component (along with system factors; Geller, 2001, 2005, 2008). Ironically, people underestimate others' willingness to receive safety feedback. In fact, 74 percent of respondents (from the SPS Safety Culture Survey) confirm they welcome

Effective listeners do not become defensive when receiving feedback or advice.

peer observations for the purposes of receiving safety-related feedback. Yet, only 28 percent believe other employees feel the same way.

Employees will be more open to safety-related feedback if coworkers do a better job of providing and receiving it. To provide effective corrective feedback to others when they are working at-risk, don't make it personal – focus on behavior. Ask questions to facilitate discussion, and don't lecture. Give feedback immediately and one-on-one, while showing genuine concern for others' feelings and well being. Offer the opportunity to work together to find better solutions. Finally, thank the person for listening.

To receive corrective feedback effectively, you must actively listen and don't interrupt.

Remain open and receptive and don't get defensive. Discuss better ways of doing the task. Finally, thank the person for providing feedback.

In addition to cautioning coworkers operating at-risk, it's important to praise employees who regularly do their jobs safely. This builds a more open, positive safety culture and increases the likelihood these work practices will be performed safely in the future. However, most employees say they almost never receive one-on-one praise or appreciation for their safety-related behaviors. Employees at all organizational levels are well served to provide frequent, genuine praise for safe work practices (Williams, 2003, 2002). Before addressing more communication guidelines, it's useful to consider various communication styles.

Communication Styles

A complicating factor with safety communication is that people have different styles of communication. Brounstein (2001) defines four basic communication patterns: the Dominant, Passive, Passive-Aggressive and Empathic styles. The first three styles are generally maladaptive and stifle the cultivation of a total safety culture. The fourth style, the Empathic pattern, is ideal and most conducive to effective communication and culture improvement.

The Dominant Communicator – Dominant communicators tend to "run people over" in interpersonal conversations. Dominant communicators often believe they're never wrong, their opinions are more important than those of others, and people who disagree with them are either disloyal or misinformed. These misguided beliefs often lead to maladaptive behaviors such as public criticism of others, blaming others when problems arise, acting bossy and negative, using verbally aggressive and threatening language, showing a lack of appreciation for the accomplishments of others, interrupting others and even finishing their sentences or dismissing new ideas without listening to the rationale.

Dominant communicators often provoke fear, countercontrol and alienation among others. Their behavior fosters resistance, defiance, sabotage, retaliation, formation of alliances, lying and covering up. Dominant communicators damage corporate culture and morale and hinder optimal organizational performance. Basketball coach Bobby Knight is an example of a dominant communicator.

The Passive Communicator – Passive communicators tend to turn people off by being indirect and meek in their interpersonal communication. Passive communicators often believe you shouldn't express your true feelings, make waves or disagree with others. Woody Allen is cited as an example of a passive communicator.

They often think other people's opinions are more important than their own. These beliefs often lead to maladaptive behaviors such as remaining quiet, even when being treated unfairly; asking for permission unnecessarily; frequently complaining rather than acting; and delegating personal choice to others. Passive communicators retreat from interpersonal conflict and accept directions without question. Passive communicators create frustration and mistrust because of not knowing where they stand. They create the presumption they lack the courage to be a leader. They also hinder open communication.

The Passive-Aggressive Communicator – Passive-aggressive communicators tend to believe you should "go behind people's backs" instead of dealing with people directly. They appear to agree with others when they really don't agree. They make sarcastic remarks and take subtle digs at others. They send critical messages via e-mail and copy others. They hold grudges, value "getting even" and sabotage others behind their backs (i.e., spreading negative gossip). Passive-aggressive communicators refuse to help others or give others "the silent treatment."

Passive-aggressive communicators cause increased factions and favoritism in the workplace. They increase negative gossip or "back stabbing," creating an environment of low interpersonal trust. Their actions often lead to diminished job performance, increased uncertainty and job dissatisfaction and increased turnover.

The Empathic Communicator – Unlike the previous three styles, the empathic communicator interacts effectively with others to maintain healthy, long-term relationships (Williams, 2006). Companies with numerous empathic communicators are likely to have more healthy organizational cultures. Empathic communicators gen-

erally believe that personal opinions and the opinions of others are important and that the process of coming to a decision – not just the outcome – is important. They think acquiring input from others boosts morale and generally leads to better decision making.

These beliefs often lead to desirable behaviors, such as communicating expectations instead of demands. The focus tends to be on proactive and action-oriented conversation, with stated, realistic expectations. Empathic communicators, an example of which is Oprah Winfrey, communicate in a direct and honest manner, and work to achieve goals without compromising others. Empathic communicators increase perception of autonomy or personal control, and motivate people to achieve and "go beyond the call of duty" for the organization. They foster an improved sense of appreciation and respect, which in turns leads to increased levels of interpersonal trust, respect, honesty and openness. The end result is enhanced organizational communication, higher morale and better performance.

Improving Listening Skills

What good is an empathic communicator if no one listens? Of course, empathic communicators also are good listeners. They listen for both emotion and content to understand what the other person is saying. They also reflect back what the speaker is saying to show understanding ("So what you're saying is…").

In addition, empathic communicators use non-judgmental tones with others and avoid being too quick to offer advice or dismiss ideas (Williams, 2006). When receiving safety feedback, effective listeners thank the person for providing feedback, regardless of how well it is given, and are not defensive about advice to improve. They let others know if the feedback they receive is rude or abrasive. They collaborate with others on developing potential solutions and reach consensus on actions to take.

In dealing with rude and difficult people, empathic communicators don't take it personally, lose their cool or lose sleep over the conflict. After all, the rude person isn't losing sleep. Empathic communicators also are able

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to effectively exchange information without emotion and tell difficult people they understand their position but don't appreciate how they delivered the message.

Why Communication is Vital

Effective communication is an integral part of achieving an injury-free workplace. Most injuries are due, in part, to risky behaviors, yet employees often are reluctant to provide safety-related feedback to coworkers. You can improve your safety culture (and performance) by providing sound guidelines to improve safety-related communication. By providing and receiving safety feedback more effectively – including corrective feedback (for at-risk behavior) and praise – the workplace can be more safe. **OH**

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