How Are We Doing?

What Safety Leaders Need to Know About Data

The "D" of the LEAD acronym I introduced in my *ISHN* column last December (2006) stands for Data. Data provide both direction and motivation for behavior. By observing the results of our actions, we learn how well we completed a task and what we can do to improve.

But some data are useless, misleading, and de-motivating. Sometimes we consider data from a faulty or insufficient measurement system, resulting in deficient diagnostics. For example, injury statistics based on self-report are unreliable and have no diagnostic value. And they can activate distress or a false sense of security. Leaders need to use data strategically to provide appropriate direction and motivation for themselves and others.

Accountability Data

"What gets measured gets done". This popular slogan reflects the connection between data and accountability. But using wrong data to assess accountability can be disastrous. "What could be worse", said the leadership guru—Dr. Edwards Deming, "holding willing workers accountable for numbers they cannot control."

Behavior vs. Performance

Dr. Deming taught us the critical difference between behavior and performance, a distinction needed to select and examine the right data. Many behavioral researchers and safety professionals use these words interchangeably, but my online dictionary (www.m-w.com) defines performance as "something accomplished" and behavior as "the manner of conducting oneself."

In other words, behavior contributes to a process and performance reflects the results of a process. Behavior-based feedback reveals data that inhibits, facilitates, or improves a process, whereas performance feedback occurs when productivity or injury data of an organization are

reviewed. Such outcome data are certainly influenced by behavior, but many other factors could be implicated—from environmental conditions to attitudes of the people involved.

Feedback Data

The behavior/performance distinction is critical for giving the right kind of feedback. Specifically, when can we hold people accountable for data? The answer is simple. Hold people accountable for data they directly influence.

In safety, for example, it's fair to hold ourselves accountable for the variety of activities we can do to prevent personal injuries—from coaching others regarding their safe vs. at-risk behaviors to completing hazard recognition and close-call reports. Likewise, if an individual's behavior or lack thereof is clearly linked to an injury, it is legitimate to hold that person accountable (in part) for the performance data reflected by injury statistics. However, the contribution of factors beyond the individual's control should be acknowledged.

Some performance deficits result from behavior deviating from the process. But performance deficits also occur from system factors independent of process-related behavior. Hold people accountable for the first, but not the latter.

Isn't this common sense? Then why does there seem to be so much emphasis on injury statistics or performance data at safety meetings? How often is a graph of safety-related behavior displayed to illustrate accomplishment (or failure) at injury prevention? Bottom line: Show process data to individuals and groups that reflect their controllable actions associated directly with performance data.

Leadership Data

Almost every book on leadership presents information on the person characteristics of leaders. For example, the recent text by Thomas Krause, *Leading with Safety* (John Wiley &

Sons, 2005) connects leadership with five personality traits—emotional resilience, extraversion, learning orientation, collegiality, and conscientiousness. Krause also distinguishes between transactional leaders (or managers) and transformational leaders with certain interpersonal styles (including challenging, engaging, inspiring, and influential). And in an earlier *ISHN* article on leadership (March, 1995), I described leaders as individuals who are energetic, passionate, open, trustworthy, compassionate, goal-directed, self-confident, intelligent, and flexible.

Applying Person Data

It's fascinating and entertaining to explore one's personality, and consider correlations between specific person factors and behavior. Many readers, for example, have taken the Myers-Briggs or an analogous personality inventory, and enjoyed learning about the behavioral implications of certain person qualities and styles. Indeed, we sit on the edge of our seats when a trainer displays data related to our own personality or job assignment.

However, I urge caution when considering these data. First, the assessment tools for personal data are often unreliable and invalid (as covered in my *ISHN* articles for November and December, 1994). Secondly, the connection between most person data and behavior is ambiguous or weak. But, the critical issue is applicability.

How can data suggesting leadership-related personality traits, states, or styles be used? Can such data provide directional or motivational feedback? Actually, using these data to influence ourselves or others is analogous to developing an action plan from an organization's injury data. In both cases, the data are unreliable and influenced by undefined factors independent of people's behavior. And neither provides useful diagnostic information to direct continuous improvement.

Practical Leadership Data

Dr. Krause does acknowledge low practical value in assessing leadership-related characteristics of people. For example, telling people they score high or low on a measure of charisma gives minimal direction for improving leadership. However, to the extent it's possible to define a particular leadership quality in terms of specific behaviors, personality data can be useful. For example, by observing people judged to be charismatic, it might be possible to identify behaviors that reflect this label and then tell people what they can do to demonstrate charisma. Subsequently, a person can be observed and given behavior-based feedback related to the presence or absence of charisma-related behaviors.

Aubrey and Jamie Daniels advance an entirely different perspective in their book, *Measure of a Leader* (Performance Management Publications, 2005). They claim the measure of a leader should focus on the behavior of the followers. In other words, leadership should be defined by follower behavior rather than leader behavior. The key type of follower behavior to look for is "discretionary behavior" supporting the leader's vision.

What is discretionary behavior? This is behavior that exceeds a worker's job requirements. It is self-directed, meaningful, and intrinsically reinforcing. I refer to this type of behavior as "actively caring" whenever it relates to injury prevention or health promotion.

Increasing Discretionary Behavior

The Daniels brothers focus on the appropriate use of "positive reinforcement" to increase discretionary behavior. With threats and punitive consequences, people do not become self-accountable, and do only what's required. Effective leaders reward behaviors consistent with their vision and thereby motivate the successive occurrences of relevant discretionary behavior.

The approach I've advocated for increasing actively-caring behavior (see my *ISHN* article for January, 1993) is consistent with these suggestions. Briefly, research indicates people are more likely to help others (or emit discretionary behavior) when they have relatively high levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, optimism, and a sense of belongingness. So anything a leader does to increase these person states will increase the likelihood of discretionary behavior.

Genuine behavior-based rewards and recognition are likely to enhance self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, and optimism, and in come cases even belongingness. But as I have reviewed in prior *ISHN* articles (for example, February, March, and April, 2002), there are other ways to facilitate the occurrence of these person states and thereby increase the probability of discretionary behavior.

In Conclusion

Any discussion of the collection and application of data will necessarily be narrow and incomplete. In fact, entire university courses focus on data acquisition, analysis, and interpretation. This article barely cracks the surface of this important topic.

The critical connection between data and accountability was discussed, as well as the need to discriminate between process-relevant behavioral data and outcome-relevant performance data. I also distinguished between the common use of person data to define leadership versus a more practical behavior-based approach to measure one's leadership competence.

One final point: Please be skeptical of people's opinions, even if they sound like good common sense. I recommend frequent use of the slogan "Got data?" And, when someone shows

you data, ask another question, “How can these data be used to facilitate continuous improvement?”

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply research-based knowledge toward improving leadership for safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller’s new book: *People-Based Safety: The Source*, as well as five video/CD/DVD programs, accompanied by relevant workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please long on to www.people-based-safety.com or call SPS at 540-951-7233.