

What's on Your Mind? The *Thinking of People-Based Safety*™

At workshops and keynote addresses on People-Based Safety (PBS), I often ask the audience whether they buckle their safety belts automatically, without thinking. Most raise their hands to affirm their buckle-up habit for safety. My reaction: That's good, but not great. It would be better to think about what you're doing while fastening your safety belt.

Conscious competence is usually better than unconscious competence, especially when the behavior is safety related. I'd like to convince you of the validity of this perspective, which deviates markedly from the philosophy of behavior-based safety (BBS). Specifically, BBS promotes development of safe habits as a primary objective of applying BBS tools.

Thinking Safe Behavior

Thinking is self-talk or internal verbal behavior. I advise my audiences to tell themselves what they are doing when they perform a safety-related behavior. For the safety-belt example, I recommend self-talk that acknowledges the behavior—"I'm buckling up for safety".

When safe behavior is accomplished for positive consequences, it is beneficial to also verbalize the rationale for the behavior. What are your personal reasons for choosing safe behavior? For safety-belt use, you might say to yourself, "I'm buckling up to do the right thing for safety—to be a competent driver" or "I'm buckling up to set the safe example for other passengers in my vehicle, and for anyone else who might see me driving."

It's possible, however, your safe behavior is not self-directed, but other-directed. In other words, you might be working safely because someone other than yourself is holding you accountable. For example, some might buckle up to avoid a fine, as implicated by the popular U.S. slogan: "Click-it or ticket".

If your safe behavior is other-directed, your self-talk should not include the external controls influencing your behavior. Until you can give a self-directed rationale, you should only tell yourself you are performing the behavior. Forget the external, other-directed reasons for your safe behavior. Here's why.

Self-Direction and Self-Accountability

As I reviewed in an earlier article in the PBS series (July 2005) and detailed in earlier *ISHN* contributions (for example, August & September 1999), when people are mindful about their behavior they are more likely to avoid human error. Self-talk enables the adjustment of behavior per situational factors. It could call your attention to other people not following your safe example, such as a passenger in your vehicle who is not buckled up.

This behavior-based self-talk increases your awareness of the best way to perform under certain circumstances. But there is a more profound reason for thinking about your safe behavior. Your self-talk influences self-persuasion, which in turn enhances self-accountability for safety. Indeed, we hold ourselves accountable by talking to ourselves. What kind of safety self-talk builds our self-accountability or responsibility for safety?

Outside vs. Inside Control

The reasons we give for our behavior determine the degree to which our behavior is other-directed or self-directed—whether we are accountable to others or accountable to ourselves. This is not an all-or-none state. We can be motivated by both outside and inside controls. But the more our behavior is directed and motivated from within ourselves, the more apt we are to perform the behavior when alone and only accountable to ourselves. This is the ideal safety state for the lone worker.

How do we put ourselves in this state? You know the answer—self-talk. We talk ourselves into being self-accountable. Some situations facilitate this thinking; some do not. In prior *ISHN* articles I defined environmental factors and contingencies that increase self-accountability thinking (for example, March 1996 & April 2001). In general, self-accountability thinking decreases as the degree of external negative control increases (as in severe threats and strong enforcement), and people's perception of personal choice decreases. Also, the more a behavior aligns with our perception of who we are—our core values—the greater the self-accountability for that behavior.

Self-Perception, Personal Values, and Self-Accountability

Who do you think you are? In other words, what kind of person are you? Do you hold safety as a core value? How do you know?

Our behavior defines us. We are the kind of person who does the things we do. However, there are exceptions. When we feel our behavior is controlled entirely by external factors, we do not view that behavior as a reflection of who we are.

When we perceive our behavior as self-directed, we use that behavior to define our attitudes and values. In other words, the behaviors we choose to perform provide information for our self-perception. These behaviors are certainly motivated by expected consequences, both intrinsic and extrinsic. The key is to perceive some degree of choice, and perception of choice is stifled by enforcement or negative reinforcement contingencies (as when we act in a certain way to avoid a negative consequence).

Thus, our self-directed behavior informs our self-perception and our core values. And, our self-perception and personal values influence our behavior. We strive for our behavior to be consistent with our values, and vice versa. When we perceive an inconsistency between

behavior and the values that define us, we experience tension or “cognitive dissonance” (the academic label used by the many social psychologists who researched this phenomenon). We direct our self-talk to reduce this negative state.

Bottom line: The rationale we provide ourselves for performing safe behavior determines whether we feel self-accountable and will continue to perform that behavior in the absence of an external accountability system. And, of course, the rationale for our behavior is determined by our thinking or self-talk. PBS teaches the kind of thinking needed to develop self-accountability, as well as the kinds of environmental/management conditions/systems needed to promote and support self-accountability thinking.

In Conclusion

Thinking affects what we do and how we feel about what we do. Furthermore, the nature of our self-talk determines whether we perceive our behavior to be other-directed, self-directed, or automatic.

Habitual behavior involves no thinking and is not an optimal state for safety-related behavior. Such mindlessness prevents critical decision-making or discriminations, and cannot support self-accountability.

We are self-accountable to perform those behaviors that reflect our personal values. And, the behaviors we choose to perform when no one is holding us accountable define our values. Our thinking or self-talk provides the link between our actions and our values. We think ourselves into performing certain behaviors, and we act ourselves into certain thinking. Through self-talk we decide whether particular behavior reflects a core value. If it does, we think ourselves into being self-accountable for that behavior.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply the principles and procedures of People-Based Safety (PBS). Also, Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has recently published Dr. Geller's new book on PBS, as well as five video/CD/DVD programs, accompanied by workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please log on to www.safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.