

The Space Between Stimulus and Response

I've heard Dr. Stephen Covey proclaim more than once that one of his most important early lessons in life was that there is a space between a stimulus and a subsequent reaction (or response). In other words, it's not necessary for people to respond reflexively to environmental stimuli or events. Instead, we have the freedom and power to choose not to respond to an antecedent condition or to decide on an action plan from a variety of alternatives. And, this choice is not necessarily dependent upon the most immediate and certain consequence.

This notion runs counter to the teaching of many behavior-based safety (BBS) consultants. Specifically, the ABC model (for antecedent-behavior-consequence) is often taught as if behavior is "triggered by antecedent stimuli" and motivated most effectively by "soon, certain, and positive consequences." Let's consider the liabilities of this model of human behavior and the advantages of realizing there is a valuable space between environmental stimuli and people's responses.

Antecedent Stimuli Do Not Trigger Voluntary Behavior

Over the years, I've heard several BBS consultants describe various environmental stimuli as "triggers" for behavior, as if a particular antecedent event elicits or causes a certain behavior to occur. More specifically, it has been said that "a stop sign triggers drivers to apply their brakes," "a gate-to-gate PPE policy elicits an increase in the use of PPE," and "a behavioral audit causes workers to increase their safe work practices."

The fact is that only *involuntary* behavior can be triggered, elicited, or caused by a stimulus. This occurs through natural or unlearned reflexive action, as when cold air causes you to shiver, a flying object coming toward your face triggers an automatic eye-blink, or the aroma of freshly-popped popcorn elicits salivation. Through a certain kind of learning called classical conditioning, previously neutral stimuli can also cause a reflexive response, as when viewing the cold weather outside triggers shivering and the sound of the microwave buzzer causes a person's mouth to water in anticipation of eating popcorn.

Most daily behavior, including that related to safety, is voluntary and not triggered by external stimuli. Antecedent conditions or events, which I have called activators in previous *ISHN* articles, can provide direction for behavior, as when a safety sign tells people what PPE is required. Individuals decide whether to follow the directive of an activator, and this choice is largely dependent on the consequences expected after performing the behavior. But, the most influential consequences are not necessarily "soon, certain, and positive."

The Qualities of Powerful Consequences

Among the qualities of "soon, certain, and positive," certainty is most influential. Think about it. If cigarette smokers were convinced that one more cigarette would certainly kill them (the ultimate negative consequence), they would not have another cigarette. And the certainty of death would not have to be immediate. Believing that one more cigarette will assuredly cause sudden death ten years from now, the cigarette smoker would probably choose to stop smoking "cold turkey."

Thus, negative and delayed consequences can be very powerful motivators of behavior, especially when certainty is a quality. If workers truly believed their risky work practice would lead to personal injury, they would likely avoid such behavior, even if the inevitable injury was to happen many months from now. But are there exceptions?

Lessons from the Exceptions

Are there individuals who would continue to smoke or take at-risk short cuts even if they believed the behavior would most certainly lead to death or serious injury? For example, do you know people who are convinced their cigarette smoking will eventually be fatal but continue to smoke? As one of my friends put it, "I must not value my life very much, because I know these cigarettes will kill me and I continue to smoke." Some people actually continue to smoke cigarettes after suffering from emphysema and forced to use an oxygen tank to breathe.

My point here is not only that negative and delayed consequences can be as motivating as those that are positive and immediate, but also that behavior cannot always be predicted by knowing the qualities of its consequences. People often choose to perform a certain behavior for personal consequences which are not obvious to another observer, and cannot be defined by the physical qualities referred to by BBS consultants. Consider for example, situations when people choose an action plan because they believe "it's the right thing to do," even though the objective costs clearly outweigh the benefits.

An Illustrative Case Study

Last March, the CBS news show “60 Minutes” ran a story about Aaron Fuerstein, the 70-year-old owner, president, and CEO of a textile mill who shocked the business world with various decisions. In December 1995, a massive industrial fire destroyed the Malden Mill textile plant in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The workforce of 3,400 was jobless right before Christmas.

Aaron Feurstein was apparently not motivated by soon, certain, and positive consequences. He did not close the business, pocket the \$300 million in insurance proceeds, and walk away a very wealthy man. Instead, he sacrificed millions of dollars by paying his jobless employees for three consecutive months, including a \$275 Christmas bonus per family. Moreover, he risked many more millions by choosing to rebuild the plant in the same location, instead of relocating somewhere with a warmer climate and lower wages.

Then, when the new plant was rebuilt and 85 percent of his employees were back at work, Mr. Fuerstein actively cared for the 400 workers who were not needed at the new facility. He extended their health benefits, assigned someone fulltime to help them find employment, and promised them their old jobs back after the plant’s expansion.

When asked why he acted selflessly and against his own best interests, Aaron Fuerstein replied, “because it was the right thing to do.” In an earlier report, Mr. Fuerstein was quoted as saying, “I consider our workers an asset, not an expense...I have a responsibility to the worker, both blue-collar and white-

collar (and) I have an equal responsibility to the community.” Later he said, “Not all who increase their wealth are wise.”

Safety and Emotional Intelligence

Most readers can certainly relate to the decision-making of Aaron Fuerstein. Every day safety professionals are presented with the challenge of motivating people to bypass the soon, certain; and positive consequences of at-risk behavior and perform a safe behavior which is usually less efficient, convenient, and comfortable. Why? Because it's the right thing to do.

In a prior *ISHN* article (October, 1996), I discussed emotional intelligence as the ability to forego immediate rewarding consequences (such as comfort and convenience) for the possibility of obtaining a larger but delayed and uncertain benefit – the avoidance of personal injury. Such emotional intelligence illustrates the space between antecedent stimulus and response, and between response and consequence. And teaching and practicing emotional intelligence likely increases the spaces between activators, behaviors, and consequences.

That's really the bottom line. Successful safety management requires that people develop the emotional intelligence to do the right thing, even when the soon and certain consequences are relatively negative. In other words, actively caring for safety often means resisting the influence of the basic ABC principle of BBS. This clearly reflects Dr. Covey's critical lesson regarding the space between stimulus and response.

In Conclusion

This presentation challenges basic principles taught by some BBS consultants. Specifically, stimuli do not trigger, elicit, or cause voluntary behavior; and soon, certain, and positive consequences are often not the most powerful motivators. This is especially the case for successful safety management. When people perform relatively inefficient, uncomfortable, and inconvenient behavior to avoid the delayed and unlikely possibility of an injury, they are resisting the extrinsic control of the ABC principle of BBS. They are demonstrating emotional intelligence – the ability to use the space between stimulus and response for personal freedom and choice to do the right thing.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions apply the principles reviewed here to provide leading-edge instruction in behavior-based safety. For more information about related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.