

January 2016 – moving from safety cop to safety coach



The start of a new year provides an opportunity to analyse the year that has just passed and to focus on priorities for the forthcoming year. When we are acting as safety leaders what is it we need to focus on to make a better safety culture and deliver a step-change in performance?

Excellent safety performance cannot be measured by the absence of accidents or the reporting of hazards, near misses and actual events. The focus on reporting is absolutely right but reporting an unsafe act or condition or an event means something has happened which needs improvement (or worse someone has been injured at work). When events are reported, these can be an opportunity to learn and improve but often this opportunity is missed through inappropriate focus on blame and identifying immediate causes.

To varying degrees, risk is still present whenever activity takes place regardless of the safety performance indices used to measure 'success' (glass half-full?) or 'failure' (glass half-empty?). Can 'success' really be measured through the absence of incidents or is the reality that nothing has been reported (potentially through a poor reporting culture or events covered up through fear)?

A positive safety culture needs to be created that focusses upon the inputs to a safe working environment and recognises the importance of trust and encouraging people who feel empowered to take responsibility for the safety of themselves and their colleagues. Professor John Rizzo calls this the 100/0 principle – 100% responsibility, zero excuses.

Safety professionals and leaders need to adapt their approach to focus on the importance of people and relationships to identify and deliver continual improvement in safety performance. A key step in this process is to move from a policing approach to safety (transactional leadership) to coaching for safety (transformational leadership). The key difference is that when acting as a coach safety leaders move from the 'shout and tell' approach to the creation of an environment in which it is easier for the individual to choose to do the right thing than do anything else.

The change in focus of safety leaders must challenge the status quo in a number of areas, two of these being:

- Prioritise communication
 - The aim is to share knowledge but there must be clarity of the message
 - Communication is not just about the words being spoken but the way they are spoken and the body language adopted
 - Communication is only successful if the recipient has interpreted and understood the key message(s) being sent
- Challenge perceptions
 - Zero isn't possible
 - We're already safe
 - Won't happen to me
 - A focus on not getting hurt rather than positive actions to be safe

Improving the quality of communication and challenging perceptions will commence the journey to a more positive safety culture through coaching techniques.

The content of this article is intended to provide a general guide to the subject matter. Specialist advice should be sought about your specific circumstances.

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