Gaining Commitment Through Influencing
and Collaborating with Others

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When it comes to making the final decision on issues that involve the interaction and coordination between several units within the organization, the ideas offered by members of the safety profession are often not fully recognized. This may play a major role in why those same recommendations are not tangibly incorporated into the final work product. The fact that we are still, to this day, talking about safety being marginalized in many companies is amazing when you consider the staggering amount of evidence that is present regarding the cost, monetarily and non-monetarily, of non-compliance with safety initiatives designed to protect organizations and individuals. This also plays into the public perception of a firm as well.

Given this as a backdrop against which many safety professionals have to live, the question now becomes, how do I get people within the organization and externally, to not only buy into various safety recommendations but to boldly support them? Further, how do I get them to offer this support when and where it is needed? These are certainly complex questions. Questions I am sure many of us have spent pondering, especially after we had witnessed 'backroom' support only to have it fizzle out when the discussion was brought to the larger table and in front of individuals who may have a more 'bottom-line' oriented view of the issues.

While there is not necessarily one best answer on how to handle this dilemma, I would like to suggest the following. Each of us needs to undergo a thorough examination of the way we, attempt to use the tools required to effectively influence and collaborate with others and how others use these tools. It can provide us as members of the safety profession with some valuable insights. Within this framework, there are four distinct areas to which we need to pay attention. First, this process requires us to understand what we mean by influence and collaboration, Second, it requires us to conduct a self-assessment to see if we possess the requisite skills that will allow us to properly effect the traits we desire to obtain. Third, it requires keen observational skills to be able to detect the presence of these skills in others. Finally, once we have done all of this we have to be able to put into practice the various components so that we can implement them and obtain the results we want.

To put this into a more pragmatic viewpoint, we have to see what needs to be done, say something to the people who might be in a position to assist us in our efforts, and do something proactively to make things happen.

You see I am sure that all of us at some point in the past have met with success when it comes to getting our ideas heard. However, anybody can do anything once. The ability to achieve success requires that we be able to replicate those outcomes on a consistent basis and not just once or sporadically.

So let us begin by taking a look at what is meant by influence and collaboration. In this way we shall be able to proceed in a systematic and logical fashion with regard to rightfully establishing the importance of safety as a major contributor to the well being of our organizations and the people we serve.

When we consider the term influence, we are involved in a discourse that concerns itself with the process of affecting the thoughts, behaviors and feelings of another person(s). Now, if we left this as a stagnant situation we would not have a full understanding of the impact or the potential impact of this word. However, we cannot stop here because the ability to influence others occurs in a dynamic state. As such we must explicate a deeper understanding of this term if we hope to be able to apply it consistently to achieve the results we desire.

To get at this outcome I want you to think about this statement, "In the beginning was the Word." Now the word that I am speaking about is in the context of the human word, which is represented by our ability to communicate verbally with one another. I am sure that no one reading this article would ever doubt the significance that the spoken word has added to our existence. However, this significance is also clouded by the various filters that each of us has as it relates to our ability to understand the spoken word in the manner in which the person communicating to us intended. In fact when you think about it we communicate as much through gestures and grunts than we do with words. When we communicate each of us needs to be more conscious of not just what words we choose but how we communicate unconsciously through our movements because often times people look beyond our words to try and define the true meaning of what we are saying or how we feel. We also need to be concerned about our tone because it conveys, in the belief of some linguists, as much as fifty-five percent of the meaning imparted to our statements by those who receive the communication.

As safety professionals we sometimes fall into the trap of communicating through the narrow lens of safety specific language. Given our backgrounds, we are comfortable with this style of communicating but it does not endear others to our causes or us. As a result, we must learn another way of presenting our position, which will allow those we are attempting to influence to more fully value our message because they can see the value we place on the relationship.

This is especially important when you consider that there are three - (3) possible influence outcomes which are:

- Resistance
- Compliance
- Commitment

At some point or another we have all encountered resistance. This occurs when the viewpoint you are advancing or the position you take on a matter meets with contention from someone who holds an opposing point of view or position. Resistance is a natural part of life but it is how we

handle resistance that will either allow us to attract people in support of our position or repel them.

If you can overcome the resistance in situations that you face then you will, more than likely, arrive at a juncture where people are willing to comply with the proposition you are advocating. While compliance is good, it is not the bold support that is needed to ensure your ability to replicate success on a consistent basis. In most situations people comply with a matter because non-compliance carries the inherent risk of punishment. A former co-worker of mine would often say during employee orientations that safety rules are written in blood. The rationale behind this, he would later explain to me, is that if people and organizations had paid attention to issues prior to their occurrence then unsafe acts and resulting injuries could have been prevented. However, since they did not, there was usually a resultant 'loss of blood' that made it necessary to establish a safety policy or procedure to address the incident. Compliance is not a bad thing and in some cases it might be the most you can hope for. However, if compliance is all you are after you will never be great and frequently you will dip below the acceptable level you desire. This represents a movement similar to an oscilloscope, where in the end the amount of variation between the upper and lower control limits is such that everything evens out. No safety professional, organization or person should desire to be in a position where things even out. The goal should be to aspire to be the best.

If you want to be the best then there is only one influence outcome that will motivate your actions and that is to gain the commitment from the constituents with whom you interact. Commitment allows these individuals to provide the bold support of the initiatives that you see as not only worthwhile but essential in making your organization a model of excellence each and every time it comes into contact with members who utilize the services you provide. And I'll tell you, every day, twenty-four – (24) hours a day, whether you are open or closed, there is an opportunity for a multitude of individuals to come in contact with your firm.

So how do we get the commitment that will allow us to move our ideas forward in such a manner that others will boldly support them? The solution to this conundrum lies in individual excellence and relationships. From an individual basis you have to demonstrate the following:

- Flexibility in dealing with others
- Integrity beyond reproach
- A positive and realistic approach to situations
- Speak inclusively

Here is just a quick word on each of these four – (4) points.

Flexibility – All of us have a preferred way of handling situations. However, if we are identified as obstinate or hard to work with then we cannot gain the commitment we need from others.

Integrity – People want to know that you will honor your commitments because if you do they will usually follow suit.

Positive Realism – When approaching any new situation you should do so with a positive and realistic approach. People who accomplish great things do so expecting a positive outcome before they encounter the situation. Finally, the greatest need any person has is to be recognized.

Inclusivity – When you speak inclusively and involve others it generates a sense of camaraderie and this makes it possible for people to willingly exert that extra effort that can carry your ideas over the top.

When it comes to relationships, one thing is for sure, you are not in this world alone, so you cannot go it alone. You need the support of others to make your dreams a reality. Therefore you will need to keep these things in mind when building a relationship.

- There is a cost in every relationship. If people perceive the costs outweigh the benefits they will look elsewhere
- People need to feel valued
- To the extent you stay in contact with others, versus just when you need them, you endear commitment
- Always provide opportunities to hear what the other person has to say

Let's move on to collaboration. Collaboration begins where influence ends and for our purposes is defined as follows: a commitment to work together to resolve issues, based on the notion that it is possible to meet one's own needs, the needs expressed by others and the organization. Through collaborating we provide the opportunity to address critical issues while also improving the relationship between organizational stakeholders. In this framework we go beyond the traditional win-win scenario to a win-win-win exchange whereby all stakeholders are considered.

The style that is most likely to yield long-term beneficial results is one where there is recognition that the ability to influence and collaborate with others does not exist solely through position power but also through personal power. It requires coaches and leaders who are proactive and are not afraid to get on the field and get 'dirty' with their team members. Individuals who consistently display this style will be able to gain the commitment they need to not only meet their objectives but to exceed them. It is a given that if you don't have the ability to get things done through others in a way that makes them feel positive about their interaction with you, ultimately you and your organization will fail to achieve the success it wants.

While it is advisable to utilize the strategies of influence and collaboration when dealing with others, it's like anything else in that it is not a panacea. Also rarely if ever will you find that you can apply one approach and find that it will be successful in all situations. While influence and collaboration usually work hand in hand they also can be used separately.

We have already talked about how the ability to influence has 3 potential outcomes. Influence also has other components that impact your ability to be recognized as a person of influence such as: authority (the right perceived or actual) to influence another. Also there is the notion of power which is the ability real or perceived to influence another. Notice that I use the words real or perceived. If someone does not believe you possess the authority or power to influence them or they are just predisposed against working with you then trying to influence and collaborate with them may be just another way of setting yourself up for manipulation.

When it comes to collaboration there are some distinct situations when we should use this strategy and they include:

- To find solutions when both parties' concerns are too important to be compromised
- When a long-term relationship between the parties is important
- To gain commitment of all parties by building consensus
- When the other person is willing to take a collaborative approach

If you look at these situations, vis-à-vis your own organizations, I am sure that each of us can think of many instances that would appropriately fit within the areas that we seek to identify. That being said, you still need to proceed with caution.

Since I have further defined what influence is and when to use collaboration let's delve into how our choice of language impacts our relationships. When we have to work with and through others as all of us have to do, there are certain words that we can use that have the effect of turning people off almost instantaneously. The first word that comes to my mind in this category of turn-off words is 'I'. Think about situations that you have been involved with and instead of receiving recognition for your contributions to the overall success of a project what you hear most frequently is someone using the saying 'I'. This is what 'I' did or 'I' made it possible for them or 'I' came up with the critical element.

When it comes to human nature as said before, the greatest need that any individual has is to be recognized. Also, people are emotional and emotions are not logical. The more you do of the first then potentially the less you will have to do of the second. To be effective in the areas of influence and collaboration, you have to be able to allow people to feel valued in the process and encourage their heart. The more you are able to understand how the choice of words you select can have undesired consequences the better you can tailor your communication so that it will be received in a positive manner.

If any of us are going to be truly effective communicators then we must understand that our ability to communicate verbally has 2 primary attendant conditions: content and delivery. Content relates to what is said while delivery is the manner in which it is said. Think of these two areas together as the music of communication. Content contains the information and ideas that carry the substance and meaning of your communication Delivery represents the shape and form that the content is given when presented. This includes the pace and rhythm of your communication, vocal quality including tone, pitch and volume, as well as, the use of non-verbal cues.

When communicating to another you need to ask yourself, will the listener be willing to dance to the music of my communication in the way I want them to do so? Communication with awkward delivery and great content or with great delivery and little content will not be very successful. When communicating, particularly face-to-face we should all strive to be listener-driven. Balance is a key to life and it is also a key to being an effective communicator through being able to properly influence and collaborate with others.

To help assist you in your ability to better communicate through words and tone here are some strategies you can use.

To improve oral communications:

- When possible take time to plan out what you will say
- Utilize words that refer to people and relationships to help create and sustain interest

- Incorporate shorter thought units to make your oral communications easier to follow
- Help embed your message in the mind of the listener by using repetition
- Make your communications more conversational and keep your audience in mind
- Eliminate industry jargon and use familiar words to increase the ability of the listener to identify with what you are saying

To improve your tone and inflection try the following:

- Remember that every nuance and inflection carries a potential meaning to the listener whether it's confidence or nervousness
- Relax, vary your pace yourself and slow down
- Don't detract from your message by using credibility thieves such as 'ah', 'um' and 'like'
- Take time to listen to your voice and believe in what you are saying

This last point is important because if your heart does not believe what is in your head then your ability to communicate effectively will be severely impaired

Aside from the outward changes that we have discussed, in order to be more effective in our ability to influence and collaborate with others there has to be a mental change as well and this entails:

- Relating to other's as a psychological equal (i.e. mutual respect for the other's needs)
- Refraining from unilaterally exercising your positional power
- Becoming open to new options and creative alternatives
- Realizing your responsibility for conflict resolution through
    - initiating discussions
    - assessing how you may be contributing, in part, to the conflict

When it comes to gaining and exercising the skills necessary to properly influence and collaborate with others, each of us has a decision to make. Do I continue in the manner, which I have become accustomed to, with its sporadic results or do I endeavor to identify a new and possibly better way of doing things? One thing is for sure, if nothing changes, then nothing changes and you cannot get better doing the same thing.