

Would You Watch Out For My Safety?

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Introduction

The outcome of this paper is to discuss several reasons employees should have for watching out for the safety of those around them, and to ask others to actively watch out for their own safety. People will do things they have a good enough reason to do. As with all motivation, it must be a good reason from their perspective. If they perceive that they do not benefit in any way, then they are less likely to behave in a way that improves our safety culture and performance. It is important to realize that not all reasons are selfish or self-serving. As Americans, we hold service to and helping others as a high ideal and value. For many, serving others and being helpful is reason enough to watch out for the safety of others.

The Challenge

Every day, people see hazardous conditions or behaviors and choose to do or say nothing. Is this because they don't care, or is something else contributing to what appears to be apathy? What we do is determined by what we think. I believe that is the genesis of the problem. When most people see a hazardous behavior or someone near a hazardous situation, they think to themselves that nothing bad will happen. The problem is that experience proves this to be true most of the time. Even in our own experience, we know that, most of the time, when we have taken a shortcut, taken a risk or not followed a procedure exactly, it usually works out fine. This builds up a series of references in our mind that reinforce the unsafe behavior. In fact, many behaviors that are risky often continue until someone has a wake-up call in one form or another.

Outside the realm of workplace safety is a good example. Teenagers typically do not use birth control until they have a pregnancy scare or close call. Then they take preventative action, often too late. The same thing would apply to unsafe driving behaviors, such as texting. Every day they continue to do so while they drive, they build evidence in their minds that they are, in fact, capable of doing both activities simultaneously. This reinforcement continues until they have a close call or a collision of some sort. Now, they realize the danger of the behavior and are more willing to change what they do. If you are good at telling stories and sharing safety concepts, you

may be able to get the same result by sharing situations, incidents, injuries, and close calls that people might relate to and decide to take action based upon other people's experience. I often point out that safety is not something you want to learn from your own experience. Wisdom is learning from the experience of others. Develop an arsenal of stories that convey the wisdom of several safe behaviors in your workplace.

Remember, You Know More of the Consequences than Most People!

When you get into the area of observing unsafe behaviors or conditions, the experience of the average person is that these very seldom result in an injury or an incident. Their life experience lets them think that nothing will happen to the person who they see near a hazard. If they really believe nothing will happen, then it is obvious that they do not need to intervene or say anything. Unfortunately, in the safety profession, we know that these behaviors or conditions do result in injuries. We must always remember that we have a unique perspective that most workers do not have. Therefore, it would be unreasonable to expect people outside of our profession to think the same way we do. An important part of our work is to help others discover reasons why they must take action.

Change What People Think

If what people think determines how they will act, we need to consider some ways to get them to change their thinking. One of my favorite techniques is to ask them how they think they would feel if someone was hurt, and they discover they could have prevented the injury. I point out that there is little difference between being the cause of an injury and being the person who could have prevented an injury. Either way, they are the one who could have prevented an injury from happening. I point out that the pain the injured person sustains may be less than the pain of knowing you were the cause of that pain. Guilt and remorse are emotions that can follow you for years after the person has healed. I tell people that the best way to be sure they never face the nightmare of this realization is to actively point out unsafe conditions and behaviors to people. This way you know that you have done your best to make sure no one gets hurt. Not every time you point out a hazard or condition will it prevent an injury; however, you will know you did your part to prevent an injury. If someone chooses to ignore you, at least you will have acted in a caring manner toward others.

One of the best ways to get people to change what they are thinking is to ask questions. That is exactly what I did in the preceding section. I asked people how they would feel if they discovered their lack of action allowed someone to be injured. This type of question will allow them to come up with the logical answer that it is better to intervene than to face the uncertainty and guilt of not acting. Basically, think of questions that will cause them to doubt any belief they have that would keep them from pointing out a safety issue.

Ask People Around You, “Would You Watch Out For My Safety?”

As you know, I believe we all need to take personal responsibility for our own safety. I even believe people should consider the safety performance of a company before they decide to get a job there. I knew that when my children were looking for their first jobs, I wanted them to be in a safe place. Because they are working for your company, I assume that they have chosen well in regards to the first issue.

Secondly, people can ensure their safety by asking their fellow workers to give them input. They need to tell the people they work with that they want to be doing their job the safest best way possible and that, if they notice anything less than this, they would appreciate them giving input. They can explain to others that they might be distracted, or having a bad day; if they are, they would want someone to help get them back on track. Also, they might have a short failure of their brain, called a cognitive failure. This can allow someone to be looking right at a hazard they would normally recognize and not see it at all. This happened to a driver who pulled his truck out in front of me on the highway one day. He looked right at me; I could see him move his head, and his eyes were looking at me. Yet, he never saw me and as a result, he pulled out from a stop sign and caused a collision. Thanks to safety belts, I get to tell the story. Otherwise, I would not be here today.

I can let my fellow workers know about this phenomenon and let them know I want input even if they think I see a hazard. It is safer for them to point it out, even though I see it, than the potential problem that would occur if I didn't. So just ask the people around you, “Would you watch out for my safety?”

Just as important as asking people to watch out for your safety is how you respond when they do as you request. Let people know that the way they respond will be the real measure of whether or not they want people to watch out for their safety. The best response is to simply say thanks, and let them know you appreciate their willingness to watch out for you. Thank them for taking the time and for noticing something that will help get you home safely at the end of the day. Be sincere, and make sure they understand you are grateful for them taking action. It is easy to say little or nothing, but what message does that send? Are you willing to weaken your request for them to watch out for you?

Be careful; that you do not fall into a common trap that seems harmless on the surface. The trap is to go beyond thanking them, and explaining why you were doing the behavior they pointed out. Obviously, you had a reason, but that doesn't make it any safer. When you respond with an explanation in addition to the thanks, it can come across as an excuse or a rationalization. Either way, it diminishes the active caring they did on your behalf. Also, make sure people watch the tone of their voice. If they are in a bad mood, even the right words can sound wrong. Make sure people listen to the tone of their voice to make sure they are sending the message they really want.

Show People Ways They Can Point Out Safety

Another reason people choose not to say anything is that, in our culture, it is uncomfortable to correct someone else. Because it is uncomfortable, people will naturally avoid it. The uncomfortable nature of pointing out an unsafe behavior makes it easier for someone to rationalize that nothing will happen anyway. The solution is to give people several comfortable ways to point out hazards or unsafe behaviors. That way they are more likely to do so.

One method is to approach someone who is doing something unsafe or near a hazard and ask a simple question. “Would you like me to watch out for your safety?” This question allows them to get permission before they say something. It also will create a curiosity in the person who is approached, as they will be wondering what you have in mind. That curiosity will cause them to answer in the affirmative, and open the way for the safety advice. In addition to making the person offering the advice feel good, this is also very courteous to the person being helped. In teaching this technique, I would encourage you to teach your entire workforce the best response that would encourage everyone to continue the behavior.

Another method is to use a simple phrase, “As you know...” Upon observing an unsafe condition or behavior, the person making the observation could simply say something like, “As you know, you need someone to help lift something that heavy or awkward.” Or, “As you know, there is a power supply under that grating.” The beauty of this technique is that it presupposes the person already has knowledge of the situation, and it is merely a caring precautionary statement. The person being helped can even respond by saying, “Thanks, I was aware of that and I appreciate your watching out for my safety.”

Teach People That the Way They Respond Will Help Others

There is another element of teaching that will help improve your safety culture and increase the frequency of people helping people, which is to teach your employees how important it is that they respond in a positive fashion. Obviously, if someone offers a safety suggestion or points out a hazard and is treated offensively for doing so, it will diminish their willingness to do so in the future. The more you can convey to people that having other people watch out for them is a real benefit, the more successful you will be. Once again, you have to answer the motivational question, “What’s in it for them?” If they consider themselves beyond ever making an error or having something distract them, this might be a hard sell. Do your best to come up with examples of how even the best person may not notice something right in front of them. I often use the illustration of looking for my keys to get this point across.

Most people have had the experience of looking all over their house for some item. You go from room to room searching, lifting, moving things, hoping to find what you are looking for. After a while, you feel frustrated and are ready to give up. If someone else is around, you finally summon their assistance and ask them to help you find the item. How many times have they walked over to where you are standing, only to point the item out right in front of you in plain sight? It isn’t about intelligence or expertise; it’s about perception and distraction. When you let them realize it is a normal occurrence that they can remember happening to them, you just need to make the connection to safety.

Imagine for a moment the item was a hazard instead of a set of keys. You could be looking right at it. You might even know what it is, but it just isn't recording in your mind. At that moment, you would be vulnerable and, if someone pointed it out to you, it would be the difference between an injury and a safe day. Take the ego out of the situation, and it is easier for people to realize that it benefits them.

Now, you have an opportunity to take it to the next level. It is easy to think that when someone points out something to me, it is all about me. After all, if I don't care if people watch out for me; isn't it my business and my risk? As with all other aspects of safety, what we do almost never affects just us. Just this last year, I realized that when I thank someone for pointing out a hazard to me or pointing out when I am doing less than the safest I can do, it can have a major impact on others, though not in a way you would commonly think. The way it affects others is that if I thank and encourage the person who intervenes on my behalf, I am creating a desire in them to do it again for me or for someone else. The positive experience they have with me will make them realize that people want their input. What they point out to me I might have been aware of, but the next person might not be aware.

I often make the illustration at this point that what the person pointed out to me might be a minor hazard or behavior. On the other hand, the next person they encounter could be near a serious hazard or behaving in a way that would set them up for a major injury. If I encourage their input, they might just be there for the next person who really needs it. Once again, I am appealing to their willingness to help others. They might be willing to enthusiastically accept input so that others might be safe, even if they don't think they need it for themselves.

This is the way each individual can help change the culture at your location. As more and more people choose to thank and appreciate it when they get safety advice, it will encourage more and more people to do the same.

You might want to discuss this with people who are leaders in your organization. I don't mean leaders on your organizational chart; I mean the people that people gravitate to; the unofficial leaders that exist in every organization. When you get them to realize the importance of this and give them a good enough reason, others will naturally follow their lead.