

Building Greater “Personal Responsibility” for Safety: With Workers & Managers

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Many managers and safety professionals bemoan the dearth of “personal responsibility” and seek to imbue their workers and culture with an ethic of all workers watching out for themselves. But regrettably traditional approaches to building personal responsibility have not shown themselves to be “tried and true.”

You’ll note that in the title of my presentation and proceedings paper, “Personal Responsibility” is in quotation marks. This is because this term can indeed be loaded. Often, in fact, calls or pressures for self-control are ignored and can even backfire, resulting in pushback to the degree that some organizational members actually go out of their ways to “show them who’s the boss,” “not be pushed around,” or similar resistant reactions and then actions.

Further, admonitions for “personal responsibility” are often in reality code for, “You’re responsible, I’m not.” I recall one incident many years ago where I was approached by a plant of a Fortune 500 manufacturing company that was beset with “accident repeaters” (a relatively few workers who were having a disproportionate number of accidents, sometimes of the same type, sometimes different ones), requesting me to craft an intervention that would reduce this repetition. The underlying assumption I heard – and have subsequently identified in many such situations with numerous other companies – is that accidents, especially repeated ones, are predominantly or totally due to faults or lacks inherent in the person who experienced these accidents, that these workers have personal problems that result in their becoming injured. These personal problems might stem from a lack of concern for their own safety, inability to direct their own attention (because they are easily distracted), are emotionally out of control to the degree that anger or discontent somehow causes them to engage in more at-risk actions, they carry over personal problems from home (they are unable to “leave their work at work and their home at home”), they are disconnected from co-workers and from the company, they are specifically motivated to undercut the company’s safety mission and record, and so on.

After extensive interview with numerous workers identified as “accident repeaters,” I was surprised to find that only a very few fit into the “problematic” worker slot, as indicated in the above-mentioned categories. In fact, I discovered there were a host of workers who had experienced numerous injuries to which there were a range of contributing forces outside of these employees. In fact, some of these contributors lay within the control of management.

I was asked by the plant manager to work with him, plant superintendents and managers over a course of two days in order to:

1. Report in my findings and recommendations for action to reduce accident repetition, and
2. Suggest actions plant managers might take to elevate safety culture and performance overall, as well as to assist in preventing and dealing with repeat accidents.

What I quickly found was that plant leadership was “loaded for bear.” They appeared to have a mindset going in of getting tough on accident repeaters, applying procedures that would pressure, confront, make these workers uncomfortable, and try to force them into compliance.

In the first morning after introductions, I asked these managers, “Can I assume you strongly believe in personal responsibility for safety?” Everyone vigorously shook their heads, and many forcefully assented verbally. I next asked, “If that’s the case, in what ways are you as senior managers personally responsible for the number of repeat accidents your plant has been experiencing?” The initial response was an uproar or anger and denial: “It’s not me/us; it’s all them!” “They are screwed up and I know this!” and more. After long discussion and sharing of viewpoint (and bias) back and forth, the managers admitted that, yes, there were likely attitudes and actions they had been engaged in that had likely:

1. Contributed to the level of accident repetition,
2. Didn’t intervene in an effective manner early to stem the tide of potential repetition, and
3. Had actually had the effect of throwing fuel on the repeater fire.

We then developed leadership strategies that, once implemented, significantly reduced accident repetition at that plant and also elevated overall safety performance among all workers, rising the overall tide of safety culture.

Identifying “Personal Responsibility” Objectives for Workers

The first step is to understand what leaders are really calling for, expecting, when it comes to “personal responsibility.” For workers, this is a “mindset” or approach that might include:

- Embracing an internal locus of control. Rather than blaming others, workers would “take personal responsibility” by looking at themselves first, at their own actions and inaction, to identify how they might be contributing to a less-than-stellar approach to safety. As opposed to “It’s a tool problem,” “They told me there’d always be at least two of us doing this job and now it’s just me – they lied.”)

- Participate positively in accident/incident investigations, either as the “injured party” or as a witness.

- Report close calls and incidents accurately, with minimal defensiveness, soon after occurrence

- Be attentive during safety briefings and meetings when talked to.

- Actively participate in safety meetings, being verbally active, venturing ideas that contribute to improved safety solutions.

- Not default to excuses for problems that occur to them (e.g., “There was nothing I or anyone could have done to prevent it. Anyone would have been caught. The machine’s always run badly like that.” “I’m too busy, there’s not enough time to follow those unrealistic safety

procedures.” “If I did everything that safety required, I couldn’t begin to do my job.” “Make up your mind – do you want me to work fast or work safe?” “What do you expect? It’s so hot/cold in here that it’s impossible to operate any other way.”)

- Be receptive to improvement, rather than erecting barriers to their learning and changing for the better (e.g., “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” “I’ve always done it this way and never had a problem.” “I’m too young, strong and fast to get hurt.” “I’m so experienced, I know what to do to protect myself.”)

- Apply good judgment; use best tools and techniques to accomplish a job safely.
- Make appropriate adjustments to work safely as weather and other external conditions change
- Employ training methods taught
- Use best tools and personal protective equipment (PPE) to accomplish tasks in a safe manner
- Alert and support others to work safely and to embrace safety
- Think of and apply what they know about safety to tasks and activities outside of work (home, hobbies.)
- Think cumulatively (understanding that small actions they take can have significant impact on their safety.)
- Think ahead (looking ahead, sequencing actions, to anticipate and avoid potential risks.)

“Personal Responsibility” Objectives for Managers

One of the common limitations of calls for “personal responsibility” is workers see these as blaming them for incidents and injuries. While workers have maximum potential to control their own thought processes, attention, judgment and actions, there are contributing factors to incidents for which they have less control. But these are more in the realm of influence of managers. Further, I contend that everyone is “personally responsible” for safety: executives, managers, front line supervisors, employee leaders, safety committee members, vendors, workers and more. Specifically, managers’ “personal responsibility” mindset might include:

- Have a realistic view of safety risks for company workers.
- Better understand range of forces that influence worker safety, including managerial communications, expectations, and actions.
- See current level of misalignment (mixed messages) sent by management regarding safety.
- Formulate and transmit realistic expectations and messages about safety.
- Lead from the front; be appropriately visible, corporate safety champion
- Communicate in ways that support, rather than undercut, reports of problems, concerns or incidents (as opposed to calling these “stupid” or in any ways “shooting the messenger.)
- Hold direct reports accountable for their effective safety leadership.
- Set realistic expectations and timelines for return on investment.
- Participate as “part of the solution,” proactively helping set leading indicators.
- Provide needed access time to safety leaders
- Arrange for resources for safety that are consistent with expressed objectives.
- Think cumulatively and longer term regarding safety.

- Motivate personally and positively wherever possible.
- Show up at critical safety events.
- Participate in introducing, visibly championing new safety initiatives.

The Problems with “Personal Responsibility”

Ironically, attempting to pressure or force an internal locus of control is inherently counterproductive. It’s worse and less realistic than trying to force yourself to relax; it’s more akin to trying to force someone else to relax. Have you heard the common all-too-true homily, “The beatings will continue until the morale improves?” Or as unlikely to be effective as trying to force someone to fall in love with you. In each case, the forceful agent may, at best, pressure the appearance of compliance, while it’s clear they are “in field” (watching/monitoring the actions of those they wish to control), almost always through vehicles of threat and fear; but, as former Intel CEO Andrew Grove says, “Fear never motivates peak performance, only minimal performance.”

The same is true for safety performance and culture. Dwelling on “personal responsibility” is unlikely to result in highest-level safety performance and culture. Ironically, while the highest level of safety culture (Level 4 on a scale of one to four, in my categorization) is based on personal embracement of self-responsibility, this mindset and supportive actions can realistically be invited and nurtured, never forced.

Calling for “personal responsibility” can run the risk of losing credibility, that the demander is hypocritical, asking for mindset in others that she herself is not willing to embrace. Have you also heard of the saying, “When I point a finger at you, I’m also pointing three others back at me?” Experience shows that, in stressed environments (which seem to describe many workplaces), people listen less to what managers say and watch what they do. It’s “Actions speak louder than words” time. So when a manager or safety professional demands “personal responsibility” – often in a frustrated tone – others default to watching for inconsistencies in the “personal responsibility” of the demander. Are they practicing what they preach? Do they expect others to change yet not move nor adjust in any ways themselves? Do they become defensive when called on to explain any inconsistencies between their words and actions?

Experience also reveals that safety cultures in which verbalizing calls for “personal responsibility” are high (generally Level 2 Safety Cultures on a scale of one to four, in my categorization), common reactions are for people to tend to their “emotional safety” by keeping their heads down, hiding injuries, not venturing suggestions that might improve policies or procedures, not volunteer, disconnect/further disengage, look to bail out of the company. To an extreme, some will even react aggressively, taking what they know to be additional risks – when they know no one is watching – in order to “show them” that they won’t be controlled by angry parent-like demands for “personal responsibility.” So ironically, in these cases, calls for “personal responsibility” can actually become contributing factors in more incidents.

Often “personal responsibility” is verbally associated with “accountability,” as in, “I’m/we’re going to hold you accountable for your actions.” Strategically, “accountability” is another loaded word, code for “sanctions” or punishment (which can range from forced/unpaid days off, embarrassment in front of peers, being written up, getting fired, etc.) Yet there are three aspects to “accountability”:

1. Sanctions for those who clearly know better and are willfully violated explicitly communicated policies and procedures,

2. Support for change for those who are interested in being compliant but don't know what to do – this might include training and improved communications, and
3. Reinforcement for those who have attempted “personally responsible mindset and actions, so they are more likely to continue in desired manner.

Further, “holding” someone accountable for safety is extremely limited. For example, if it is agreed that senior management is also accountable for safety culture and performance within their organization, how is it possible for a safety professional to hold an executive accountable for safety, much less anything? And if that safety professional does not have supervisory power to discipline or fire a worker, how can that professional in actuality “hold” that employee accountable for their actions? Regrettably, this mindset and language often is seen as an empty threat.

Secrets for Boosting “Personal Responsibility”

The highest level safety culture is one in which each worker (or as close as possible) embraces safety, looks first at themselves, is motivated to employ best and safest judgment and actions. But, given the aforementioned problems with calls for “personal responsibility,” how is it possible to strategically move closer to this mode?

- Adapt a mindset of inviting, rather than attempting to force others to assume responsibility for themselves.
- Lead by example, exemplifying “personal responsibility” in leadership. For example, speak about “lessons learned,” what you might do differently in a similar situation in the future, how you defaulted towards first looking at yourself and your own actions in any incident you experienced (rather than immediately blaming the environment, someone else, etc.)
- Transfer skills for improving “Personal Responsibility.” These include: skills for better directing attention, practical methods for self-monitoring, personal stress control,
- Move away from the term “Personal Responsibility,” which can be loaded and often perceived negatively, towards the expression “Personal control,” which has a more positive association.
- Motivate through personal benefits, what's in it for each individual to embrace safety mindset and engage in safer actions, rather than attempting to motivate through pressure and force.
- Listen, question, request information that will help you develop strategies that are internally motivational, rather than carrot-and-stick externally motivational.
- Monitor levels of resistance to safety messages. Redirect your own initial reaction to seeing such resistance away from blaming others (“It's their fault.” “Why won't they just do what they're told.” “I just don't get the support I need.”) to reflecting what you might have done to result in any pushback or disengagement. And, most importantly, what adjustments you might make to reduce pushback and make engagement more appealing through changing your own actions.
- Self-monitor assumptions when you perceive there is too low a level of “personal responsibility.” Rather than assuming this is just ornery, stubborn or willful resistance, question

whether your own communications of expectations or policies might have been more effective, or whether the gap between desired mindset and actions might more stem from lack of ability or skills to accomplish improved actions, rather than resistance.

- Move towards self-observation from external checklist observations. Move from “observation to conversation” that is nonjudgmental, non-punitive.

This is not an exhaustive list. And, of course, each leader – and company – will be most effective when customizing these principles to their own style and culture.

But with the right principles and practices it is possible to sidestep the downsides of “Personal Responsibility,” reducing pushback, to elevate personal and company safety performance and culture.

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