

Safer by Choice

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Introduction

We all make choices. You made a choice to attend this session at the PDC or not to attend and review the information on the proceeding DVD. Why did you make the choice?

This session will review why we make the choices we do. Drivers behind the choices will be discussed along with operational conditions that either drive or allow certain choices. Ideas and concepts are adapted from materials by James Reason, Sydney Dekker, the Department of Energy Human Performance Handbook and many years of personal experiences and choices – both good and bad.

Basic Concepts

We all have and make choices each and every day of our lives; choices from the simple to the complex. From those selected with a great deal of thought to those on the spur of the moment. Choices made based on our values and then those made instinctively or in reaction to some stimulus. It has been found that past choices drive future choices. What flavor ice cream do you constantly order? What is your favorite color? What TV show is a must watch for you? Yes we are constantly making choices.

But sometimes choices seem hard and we may hesitate or maybe even worse procrastinate. In the cases, someone else may choose for us. Allowing this to happen may position us in a state of weakness and ensure we do get the desired outcome. When asked what you want for a special occasion such as Christmas, your birthday, etc., you respond, “I don’t care”. Then you are surprised with that hideous tie, bottle of perfume that smells like detergent or great appliance such as a vacuum cleaner.

You are presented with a challenge in the workplace, a short deadline, an unsatisfied customer, a defective part, what choices were made to create the situation? What choices will you make to rectify the issue? The light bulb needs changing, but the ladder is two minutes away in the cabinet down the hall. Do you get the ladder or grab the five-legged chair? You’ve done it before and nothing happened.

Finally, indecision is a choice. A choice to do nothing is a decision. A decision to delay is a choice that maybe over time someone else will do it.

Bottom line –it is easy to make a choice and it is hard to make a choice.

Oh, and one more thought, the results of that choice may sometimes be a matter of luck or chance!

Fundamental Concepts

There are three basic elements at play; compliance, the business and people.

There is a certain order to things; rules, procedures, standards, etc. These may be promulgated by a governmental agency (federal, state or local), a consensus of those doing a similar business or those developed and implemented internally. Choices not to comply usually carry consequences from violations and fines up to termination. Choices to comply should be a core element of the company culture.

The business element is a critical choice driver. Most businesses are in business to make money, increase shareholder value, satisfy customers, provide a return to investors, etc. In many economies, we are faced with doing so with limited resources. Increased competitiveness is another fact of life. When good choices are made, the business may prosper and grow. Yet, in recent times we have seen the effect of bad choices that have actually put them out of business. These choices, good or bad, not only affect the business but the lives of many from employees to shareholders.

Probably the most challenging of all the elements is the people. How do we operate within a realm of the infinite variable – human action and interaction. In the context of this session, no one wants to get hurt. Then why do seemingly good employees sometimes make such poor choices, choices that may impact them, their family and the organization. What is going on just before and at the moment the choice is made?

Good regulators make poor regulation, good companies make bad choices and good, well-intentioned employees make inappropriate choices.

We will look at the interrelationship of these three elements to see what roles they may play in the choices we make.

Basic Drivers

What drives choice? There are a number of factors that may enter into each choice.

Experience – what have we seen, encountered, handled in the past

History – what has happened consistently over a significant period of time

Peer Pressure – what choices are peers making or have made

Plan – either good or bad, we plan the work and work the plan

Habit – what have we done repeatedly to a point where it is now a habit

Process – the design, flow and interaction of the elements of the value stream

Culture – the values that guide organizational activities

Outcome – what will happen, either real or perceived

From a business perspective, drivers may be:

- Survival
- Beat the Street
- Culture
- Who's in Charge
- Ego
- Productivity
- People Based
- What the Competition is Doing
- Core Values vs. Priorities
- "Git 'R Done" Mentality
- Cycles
- Technology
- Public Perception

Drivers for management/leaders may be:

- Position
- Power
- Promotion
- Ego
- Simon Says
- Herd or Pack Mentality
- Risk Taking
- Fear Factor
- Walk-the-Talk

Employee drivers may include:

- Just Following Orders
- Herd or Pack Mentality
- We've Always Done It This Way
- Peer Pressure
- Advancement or Promotion
- Unclear Picture of the Outcome
- No Personal Experience
- Comfort
- Convenience/Inconvenience
- "Gotta Do Something"

As we can see, there are a number of factors influencing choices from both the business as well as the employee's perspective.

When we make choices bad things can happen, good things can happen or nothing happens. What can we do to make better choices?

Barriers to Making Choices

As if it is not already difficult to make the right choice, barriers are thrown up that make the process even more difficult. The drive to do the right thing is ever present. In today's culture, there is a fear of failure. The negative connotation of mistake and failure may override other elements in making our choice.

There seems to be a fear of commitment and taking responsibility. We are not sure of which is best and want to be 100% sure that we are making the right choice. Also, making a choice requires thought. We sometimes don't like to think. Just tell us what to do so we can get on with our lives.

Finally, there is the emotional state. What is going on in the business, in our lives, in the world, that may have an impact on the choice. Are we fearful of layoffs? Is there an impending merger? Are there family problems? Is a child in poor health? Are there family medical issues? Who is going to win "the big game"? In addition to the external factors, there may be some mind games being played from an emotional context. There is that "gut feeling". "I know it in my heart", "I can feel it in my bones" or "I just know it". These are all real issues that the time clock or magnetic card is not going to remove as they clock in for work.

What Do We Do About It?

There has been much research on improving human performance, error reduction and therefore better choices. Here a few of the findings and suggestions to allow for better choices.

Organizational or Employee

It has long been a stance that there are two fundamental causes of accidents – unsafe conditions and unsafe actions of employees (i.e. bad choices). Varied numbers and percentages have been bantered about from 80% unsafe actions to as high as 96% unsafe actions. Believe these or not, there have been some interesting findings over the recent years.

Studies have shown that of the 80% associated with unsafe actions, 70% of that number are driven by organizational issues leaving only 30% percent of the 80% directly attributable to the employee. Given these findings, it is imperative that we look at the organization and consider the organizational drivers to choice as well as those that may come from within.

Principles and Fundamentals

These studies have put forth several principles surrounding this line of thought. Put into the context of choice, these principles are:

1. People are fallible and even the best make poor choices.
2. Poor choices are predictable, manageable and preventable
3. Individual choice is influenced by organizational processes and values
4. High performance levels are based on encouragement and reinforcement received from leaders, peers and subordinates
5. By understanding the reasons for poor choices and applying lessons learned from past mistakes, future poor choices can be avoided

Another basic fundamental is that we all have defenses to help avoid poor choice. It is when we have holes in the defenses that poor choice will lead to undesired events and losses. There are two types of defenses; hard and soft. Hard defenses are things like process enclosures, guards, interlocks, etc. Soft defenses include procedures, standards, rules, etc.

When looking at why we may make certain choices, it is important that we consider what performance mode we may be in. Are we on auto-pilot and working from a skill based perspective? Are we in a rule-based mode? Do we have sufficient knowledge? Each of these may impact our choice.

There are precursors or traps that may hasten our choice. Some of the may be:

- Time Pressure
- Distractions/Interruptions/Breaks
- Multi Tasking
- Overconfidence
- Vague Instructions/Guidance
- First Shift / Late Shift
- Peer Pressure
- Change/Abnormal Situation/Non-Standard Work
- Physical Environment
- Mental Fatigue/Stress
- Normalized Deviation

How many times have we experienced one or more of the above. To understand your current situation or to better understand why a choice was made, it might be valuable to understand your OOPS score. The OOPS (Organizational Opportunities to Perform Safely) score is a look at how many of these precursors or trap are or were in place at the time of the choice. Within this context a high OOPS score indicates enhanced potential for poor choice. For your own copy of an OOPS Scorecard, make a request when you visit the following website www.safetybyskipper.com.

Tool Time

What can we do to help ensure the right choices are made? There are several methods available for implementation.

First we must understand that there may be up to 5 steps in making a choice. We first define the situation. Then we gather information surrounding the situation. Next is thought about the alternatives. Once this is done, we select or choose. And then, finally we act upon our choice. It must be understood that this process may be both rational and/or irrational.

To help drive to the rational side, it is helpful to ask:

- Will I get hurt
- Will it hurt others or the process
- Do I have any alternatives

- If in doubt, talk it over – even with yourself
- Take/Make time to get the answers needed

One effective tool is a pre-job brief. For clarification, this is not a hazard analysis done before starting the job, toolbox talk, tailboard meeting, etc. This is a four-step process performed immediately before a critical step. A critical step might be pushing the start button, pulling the trigger on a saw or other tool, moving the lever for the lift, etc. The best way to determine if it is a critical step is to ask the question “can I take it back?” If the answer is no, then you are at a critical step (e.g. pulling the trigger on a weapon). An effective way to implement this process is to think of a STAR. This is the acronym for:

S – Stop

T – Think of what might happen, weigh the options, get additional information

A – Act based upon all information

R – Review the results of the action to support or refute future choices

Examples of application of this tool may include a yellow or gold star next to each critical step in your job hazard analysis. This indicates that on reaching this step it is time for a pre-job brief when prior to actually performing the step. It is also helpful to place a star (either sticker or paint) on any lever, trigger, button, switch, etc. that might initiate a critical step. This provides a visual reminder to perform the pre-job brief before initiating action.

In the absence of the STARs, another tool is the use of a questioning attitude. This questioning attitude includes some of the STAR activities along with additional questions such as:

- Do I have adequate knowledge to make the choice
- Do I have the adequate skills to make the choice
- Am I properly trained to make the choice
- Is this choice covered by a standard, procedure or rule
- Is the standard, procedure or rule up to date and adequate
- Have any modifications been made
- Have I chosen the right equipment and is it in good shape
- Are the defenses in place in the event of a poor choice
- What may be the consequences of the choice

There are many other tools available, but these are several that are applicable across the broadest range of situations and may be used in situations where other are present or more importantly when working alone.

Bottom Line

We are constantly making choices in our work and personal lives. The choices we make not only impact our personal wellbeing, but the wellbeing of our families, fellow employees and the business. There is much more information to be investigated in this area. This session has just scratched the surface. Hopefully the choice to attend this session or to read these proceedings will aid in your wellbeing by assisting in the understanding of your choices and better the outcome of your next choice.

Bibliography

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