

# MOTIVATING EMPLOYEES FOR SAFETY SUCCESS

By THOMAS R. KRAUSE

**H**ow can an employer motivate employees for safety success? That is a fascinating and perplexing question. To achieve continuous improvement in safety, it is a question that must be answered. Unlike compliance, which can be imposed on an organization, the drive for continuous improvement must come from *within* the organization.

Motivation is perplexing, in part, because it involves not just one question, but a cascade of related questions.

- What motivates an employee for safety success?

- Is "it" the same thing for all employees and all areas? Does the company motivate plant managers in the same way it motivates first-line supervisors or front-line personnel?

- If the answers to the first two questions are known, can they be used to motivate site personnel for quality and productivity as well? Or, are those kinds of excellence sufficiently different from safety that they have unique motivators?

- Where does motivation of any kind come from? From within the individual (thoughts, beliefs, ambitions, goals)? Outside the individual? For example, does receiving a pay increase motivate a person to strive for excellence in safety?

- Speaking of pay with regard to motivation, should site personnel *need* to receive more than paychecks and guide-

lines? Set aside considerations of productivity and quality for a moment. Shouldn't personnel be sufficiently motivated by the fact that achieving safety excellence is the best way to preserve their own well-being?

- If the answer is "no," what does it mean that livelihood and procedures are not enough to motivate people for safety? That an employer must constantly devise new methods to keep workers motivated—that they need more variety or novelty to stay motivated? Or does some approach exist that goes beyond paychecks and procedures—deep enough into the organization to become part of "how things are done around here"?

- What alternatives exist to the traditional carrot-and-stick approach of reward and punishment? This approach has long been used to influence behavior, but what issues arise concerning its use to motivate people?

By surveying seven approaches used to motivate safety improvement, this article attempts to answer these questions. To help readers sort through the many alternative answers, a key distinction has been added to the title of this article. Success requires going beyond mere motivation to the more complex, fruitful goal of motivation *for* safety success. Site personnel must be more than motivated—they must be motivated to do the right things. They can be enthused, yet still confused. In safety, good intentions and enthusiasm are simply not enough.

### SEVEN APPROACHES TO MOTIVATION

With these questions in mind, let's consider the following seven approaches used to motivate employees for safety success.

- 1) motivational speakers;
- 2) slogans, posters and signs;
- 3) KITR\* (kick-in-the-rear)
- 4) disciplinary action;
- 5) gain-sharing programs;
- 6) contests, awards and incentives;
- 7) engaging employees in the safety improvement process.

(\*The acronym KITR is the author's modification of a closely related acronym coined by Herzberg in "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?")

This article evaluates the effectiveness of these approaches in today's real-world conditions. Safety practitioners are being asked to do more with less. Resources are scarce; employee ranks have been trimmed; and people are being asked to perform more tasks. Good or bad, this is the current situation and it is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. With these constraints in mind, let's examine the seven methods.

### Motivational Speakers

Most organizations have used motivational speakers in their quest to improve safety. These speakers emphasize what is possible—and get workers excited about pursuing those horizons. They encourage workers to think, "Yes! Our organization really can reach that goal!"

# Personnel must be more than motivated. They must be motivated to do the right things. Good intentions and enthusiasm are simply not enough.

In the author's opinion, Charlie Morecraft is a great motivational speaker. Years ago, he was badly burned in an industrial fire; since his recovery, he has spoken to many business and manufacturing firms about the importance of safety.

Yet, although his message is valuable, Charlie would quickly note that simply through his talks, he does not and cannot change a site's safety system. The kind of motivation he delivers has a temporary effect; long-term change requires new activities to improve the safety system.

In the absence of such change, temporary motivation has a downside. If personnel experience a repeated cycle of getting revved up by motivational speakers only to return to a problematic safety system, they will likely grow discouraged and cynical. They have been shown the light, but their daily work conditions remain dark.

**Evaluation:** An organization prepared to address safety system issues can benefit from motivational presentations; one not prepared to do so can experience a net loss from their use.

## **Slogans, Posters & Exhortations**

Safety slogans, posters and exhortations are another common approach to motivation. To be effective, however, they must be consistent. For example, if safety truly is "number one" at a site, then posting signs touting that fact can be a motivator. In such settings, it is also useful to encourage employees to "talk up safety."

When the message is inconsistent with the facts, however, the outcome is negative. Suppose that on the shopfloor, safety is actually lower on the organization's list of values. Displaying "Safety First" signs merely announces that a disconnect exists. Front-line personnel may conclude that management is either out of touch with shopfloor reality—or worse—that management does not care about that reality as long as everyone repeats the slogan.

**Evaluation:** If slogans and practice are consistent, they can help motivate employees for safety success. If not, they likely do not help—and may actually hinder—safety efforts.

In effect, these first two methods confront the employee group with the comparison between the "talk" and the "walk." If the organization does not "walk the talk," the workforce concludes that "talk is cheap." As a result, even more-serious or substantive safety communications may be dismissed or ignored.

## **Kick-In-The-Rear**

KITR has been around for a long time; it is also known as the "now hear this" approach to motivation. It exhorts, "You will do this today. ALRIGHT!?" Although tempting at times, it is outmoded in today's leaner organizations. With fewer supervisors available, such an approach will not likely succeed.

**Evaluation:** Without a high ratio of supervisors to supervised, KITR control is not practical (even if it were desirable). Furthermore, many companies that are leaders in safety have abandoned this approach as undesirable under any circumstance. It can have a negative impact on safety communication, with a ripple effect that lasts long after the initial message has been delivered.

## **Disciplinary Action**

In some ways, disciplinary action can produce similar, long-lasting negative effects. This does not mean disciplinary action has no place in a safety effort. In fact, an inconsistent disciplinary policy can be damaging because it may demotivate site personnel. This occurs when employees perceive favoritism or randomness in disciplinary actions taken.

Shopfloor personnel often note (during confidential interviews) that, in their opinion, some co-workers need to be disciplined because their conduct puts others at risk. Shopfloor personnel justifiably see disciplinary action as management's responsibility. At the same time, however, everyone wants that action to be fair.

*A special note:* At sites using behavior-based safety, even the most fair, just disciplinary procedures must be separated from peer-based behavioral observation. One cannot expect employees to conduct observations that may become grounds for disciplinary action against co-workers.

**Evaluation:** Disciplinary action is a necessary function. However, a company must recognize that such action is not a motivator for safety success. Furthermore, it usually has negative side effects and, therefore, is not an answer to the motivation question.

## **Gain-Sharing**

A growing number of organizations are instituting gain-sharing programs. Do they motivate employees to be successful in safety? In the author's opinion, gain-sharing is a double-edged sword that puts safety organizations in a difficult position.

The best strategy depends on whether the company already uses gain-sharing for various purposes. For example, suppose a gain-sharing program is in place to motivate personnel to reach productivity and quality targets. It is then asked, "Should safety targets be included?" Since safety is as important a component of site performance as are production and quality, will its exclusion send a confusing message to employees? In such cases, it is better to include safety.

However, several questions must be answered. Exactly what is the best way to link safety performance to gain-sharing? What should the contingency be? What factor(s) should determine whether gain-sharing will pay off when safety is included? An effective way to achieve this linkage is to combine upstream indicators with statistically significant incident frequency rate improvement. The best upstream indicators measure activities that predict a significant decrease in incident frequency rates.

That said, in the author's opinion, gain-sharing should not be the primary source of motivation. Too often, employees either do not know what the contingency is or simply do not understand it. "Well, certain things happen and we get some money" is a common response. When asked to define those "things," they may state, "Well, safety is in there somewhere, and the way it works is we have to have some number of accidents." When asked where their department or shift stands relative to gain-sharing targets, they often do not know.

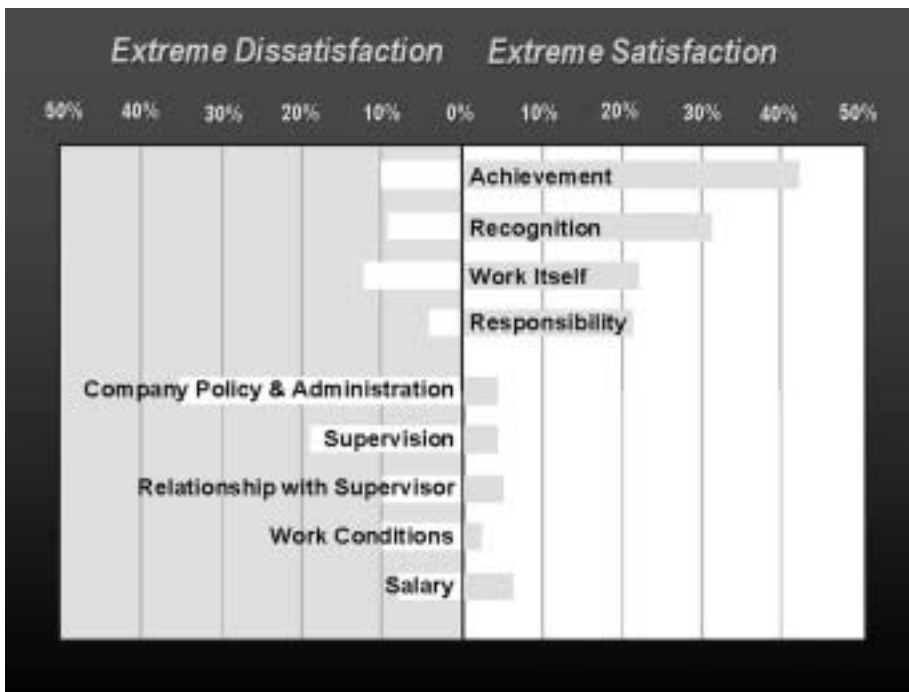
**Evaluation:** If personnel do not understand the linkage between safety and gain-sharing policies, no motivational benefit will be realized. If employees cannot define the contingency, then its mere existence will not motivate them to change their performance.

Even if personnel understand the connection, gain-sharing remains problematic. Although the gain-sharing event is a positive consequence, it is an uncertain event; if it does occur, it does so long after the behaviors it is meant to motivate.

## **Safety Incentives**

Safety incentive programs are a controversial topic. When considering such programs, concerned professionals must ask several questions. Do incentives as a safety motivator send the right message? Does the program send a message that safety is

# FIGURE 1



Source: Adapted from Herzberg, "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?"

truly valued? Is feedback accurate? Is the right behavior being motivated? Does the program encourage accurate reporting or drive injury information underground?

An incentive program has several key drawbacks:

- It sends a trivial and incorrect message about the seriousness of safety.
- It gives workgroups and supervisors inaccurate feedback about performance.

Clearly, some behavior can be motivated through incentives, but is it the right behavior? Is a strong safety culture created—a sense of shared values for safety? Does such an approach motivate workgroups or does it foster cynicism?

In the author's opinion, safety incentives do more harm than good. They can create an environment in which employees generally want something each time they are asked to participate. "I'll participate, but what do I get in return?" In safety, such a culture is devastating.

Front-line employees—the people who understand the system and want to make improvements—often do not want incentives. Yet, management often ignores this message, viewing incentives as the easiest way to "get the numbers right."

**Evaluation:** Overall, incentives are more harmful than useful; they create more problems than they solve.

### Engaging Employees in the Improvement Process

This method is the most effective. First, let's define engagement. Site personnel must be connected to their work in various ways: intellectually, emotionally, creatively and psychologically.

**Intellectual connection.** Workers should

be knowledgeable about safety efforts. They must understand why certain things are done, be encouraged to share their ideas and asked to think about what is occurring in the workplace. This creates an intellectual connection to site performance.

**Emotional connection.** Employees should realize that what they think *does* matter.

**Creative connection.** Employee ideas, suggestions and innovations are desired.

**Psychological connection.** Especially in safety, employees need to believe, "This is an organization that cares about me—enough that steps are taken to improve overall safety, and I'm part of that."

Employee engagement is the connection between employees' multiple levels and the work they perform. When that connection is made, enormous energy is released. People thrive as they help discover great ideas that improve the overall workplace. In such an atmosphere, behavior improves and attitudes follow.

### The Work of Herzberg & Deming

Since the mid-1970s, two people working in the field of motivation have understood this connection better than anyone else: psychologist Frederick Herzberg and quality pioneer W. Edwards Deming.

Herzberg's work on motivation was summarized in "One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?" Originally published in the *Harvard Business Review*, the article has become a classic, selling 1.2 million reprints in a 12-year period. Herzberg studied thousands of people in various work environments, at different levels, and in different kinds of tasks and performance areas; he found a consistency

across all of these people concerning factors that contribute to job satisfaction—and dissatisfaction (Figure 1).

Until Herzberg's work, conventional wisdom assumed that motivators and demotivators were related—like two sides of a coin. All that is necessary to motivate, it was reasoned, is to remove de-motivators. For example, if lack of a paycheck is a de-motivator, then the presence of a paycheck must be a motivator.

Herzberg found that factors which motivate people are not simply the opposite of those which de-motivate them. To clarify this relationship, he referred to demotivating factors as "hygiene"; this label reflected their connection to basic organizational "health" (e.g., paying employees on time, maintaining personnel records). The crucial point is that *employees can become de-motivated by poor organizational "hygiene" factors*. However, this is different than being positively motivated. The reason for this split is that motivational factors are of a different kind than demotivational factors.

Herzberg found that work-related motivational factors encompass things such as achievement, recognition and the work itself. The powerful message is that motivation is based on growth needs. According to Herzberg, when employees develop new capacities, new capabilities and new knowledge, they become motivated. The ultimate reward in motivation is personal growth. The message is, "Job enrichment remains the key to designing work that motivates employees" (Herzberg 120).

Deming's work reveals a similar focus—with this interesting observation about the importance of the system: "Performance does not come from the individual. Performance comes mostly from the system . . . or for lack of a system. . . ." This observation seems to limit drastically what can be done in the area of motivation. By asserting that the system—not the individual—determines performance, is Deming saying it does not matter whether people are excited about excellent performance? No. Above all, he believed in engaging people in their work.

Nonetheless, he poses a dilemma: on one hand, internal motivation is crucial; on the other, the system, not the individual, determines the level of performance. Safety professionals must not shrink from this dilemma. One effective solution is to engage employees in the process of improving the system. As Deming often told seminar attendees:

People are entitled to self-esteem and joy, and our system of reward has crushed that. . . One is born with intrinsic motivation, self-esteem, dignity. One inherits joy in work, joy in learning. These attributes are high at the begin-



# Systems must engage employees in improving the work process itself. Achievement, recognition and job satisfaction must be used as motivators to achieve that goal.

ning of life, but are gradually crushed by the forces of destruction. You've got to bring back the individual. We've ruined him. Smothered him. Shackled him (*People Systems*).

In Deming's terms, extrinsic motivation comes from factors such as money, disciplinary action and incentives. He illustrated this point via a personal experience. In his later years, Deming needed a wheelchair to travel through airports. One night, upon arriving in Washington, DC, a young airline employee met him at the jetway, commandeered a wheelchair and wheeled him outside to his waiting driver. He greatly appreciated her assistance and attempted to give her a \$5 tip. Her refusal made him realize that he had hurt her feelings. "She didn't [help me] for \$5. . . . She didn't do it for reward. She did it for the sheer pleasure of doing it" (*Deming Competition Doesn't Work*).

This does not mean that safety professionals and managers should avoid reinforcement, only that they must be careful about how they reinforce performance.

The joint message of these pioneers is that the first need is to design systems that engage employees in improving the work process itself. Second, achievement, recognition and job satisfaction must be used as motivators to achieve that goal. Third, care must be taken to ensure that rewards do not inadvertently de-motivate.

This leads back to this article's title. How can employees be motivated for safety success? How are these ideas put into practice? By engaging employees at the intellectual, emotional, creative and psychological levels. Doing so unleashes the tremendous energy that already exists within each employee.

This approach works in today's world of scarce resources, more duties and less control. In such an environment, safety professionals must strive to engage employees in improving the very system they work within. Through this process, they become connected to an important aspect of their daily life; via that connection, they exert control and justifiably feel they have something to say about how things are done. They have an opportunity to make improvements, and that is a positive outcome.

Safety is an ideal field in which to apply this knowledge. Compared to other system improvements, safety is the best channel for motivating employees through engagement. When front-line personnel

talk about improving productivity or quality, they often do not display the same immediate connection they do when discussing safety. Even when employees are cynical about safety performance, safety remains an ideal mechanism for motivating employees. (This does not suggest that safety improvement is easy, only that *everyone* can see the benefits of improving the safety system.)

What does this engagement actually look like? At sites where such motivation is at work, an array of improvements are being achieved as the result of workforce contributions. Safety has moved "out of the safety office." Safety managers recognize that they cannot make the necessary improvements alone—that they can have the greatest impact by helping their organizations establish new sets of behaviors across the entire environment.

Organizations that are applying the lessons of Herzberg and Deming see employees engaged actively in the safety effort. Front-line employees:

- participate in design review process;
- help select safety equipment;
- conduct safety meetings;
- identify behaviors that are critical to risk reduction;
- serve with distinction on teams;
- work on ad-hoc problem-solving committees;
- perform incident investigations;
- communicate safety successes and barriers to co-workers;
- act as safety observers;
- draft safety suggestions.

Employees can be engaged and motivated in many ways. The key is how the attempts are executed. From beginning to end, these remedies are only as good as how they are administered.

In this new approach, managers need to manage the involvement opportunity. Engagement and motivation do not occur automatically. Some critical success factors must be present. Employees must be prepared to succeed. It is not enough to say, "You three people will serve on an incident investigation committee. You three will be observers. You three will start writing critical behavior definitions." As Deming observed, people must know about system considerations because if the system does not change, "involvement" cannot make a difference. That requires planning, coaching, good communication and ongoing support. Such motivation takes time and effort.

## CONCLUSION

Safety professionals are poised to contribute to employers in a way that other areas do not enjoy. Safety is an ideal entry point for engaging the workforce. Not every employee will be fully engaged or motivated, but that is not necessary. Fully engaging a small group of people can have a tremendous, positive impact on overall culture.

When safety starts to improve—not because of gimmicks but because the system is actually being improved by those engaged in the improvement effort—employees become excited and connect with that effort. Then, remarkable achievements can occur. This positive change spills over and affects the entire organization—from productivity and quality to morale and culture. ■

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