

Social Influence Principles

Fueling participation in occupational safety

By E. Scott Geller

PEOPLE ARE SOCIAL ANIMALS. Social relationships define who we are, how we feel and how to get what we want. We participate with and for other people on a daily basis. Often, our motivation to participate comes from others, whether we are working alone or on a team. Participation in occupational safety is facilitated or inhibited by the various social relationships in a work culture. The challenge of developing the interdependent relationships needed to achieve an injury-free workplace is dependent on the social influence principles described here.

These principles can be used to analyze the interpersonal factors that hinder optimal involvement in safety and to decide which can be changed to fuel more participation. Whereas the 10 research-based principles to sustain participation in a safety improvement process are derived essentially from cognitive science [Geller(d)], these guidelines are gleaned from social science. These sets are very different, yet they are interdependent and mutually supportive. The powerful principle of consistency, which research suggests is generally the most popular and clearly relevant to increasing participation, is described first [Geller(b)].

Principle 1: We Try to Be Consistent in Thought & Deed

Simply put, when people make a choice, take a stand or develop an attitude, they encounter personal and social pressures to perform consistently with their commitment. This pressure comes from three basic sources:

1) Society values consistency within people.

2) Consistent conduct is beneficial to daily existence.

3) A consistent orientation allows for shortcuts in information processing and decision making [Cialdini(a)].

When people show inconsistencies between their promises and their behaviors, they may be labeled “flighty,” “confused,” “scatterbrained,” “neurotic” or “two-faced”—designations that most people seek to avoid. This principle also accounts for people’s resistance to change, and explains why a change in behavior often leads to a corresponding change in attitude, and vice versa.

Public, Active & Voluntary Commitment

When people sign their name to a petition or pledge card, they are making a commitment to behave in a certain way. Later, they behave in this manner to be consistent with their commitment. The consistency principle has been applied to increase various safety-related behaviors (Geller and Lehman). For example, after discussion about a particular work procedure, the audience might be asked to make a commitment to perform the desired behavior. But what kind of commitment should be requested? Commitments are most influential when they are public, active and perceived as voluntary and, thus, not coerced [Cialdini(a)]. Also, it is better to have people sign their name to

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a card, petition or public declaration display than to merely raise their hands. People are more likely to live up to what they write down. Of course, those pledging to follow a certain work practice must believe they made the commitment voluntarily.

Start Small & Build

To be consistent, a person who follows a small request is likely to comply with a larger related request made later. Thus, after agreeing to serve on a safety steering committee, an individual is likely more willing to give a presentation at a safety meeting. Researchers call this the “foot-in-the-door” technique and have found it to be successful in boosting product sales, monetary contributions to charities and blood donations [Freedman and Fraser; Cialdini(a); Geller(c)]. However, this technique only works to increase safe behaviors when people comply with the initial small request. If a person says “no” to the first request, this individual will find it easier to refuse a second, more important request. In this case, the consistency principle is working against the requestor.

Which First: Attitude or Behavior?

Because of the consistency principle, it does not matter whether attitude or behavior changes first. The issue is whether a technique is available to influence one or the other. In fact, one could argue that internal (attitudinal) dimensions are intertwined throughout a successful technique that targets behavior. For example, an effective pledge-card procedure requires that people believe (internally) their commitment was voluntary. Following successive compliance with escalating demands, internal commitment is developed, until eventually an “attitude” results.

Furthermore, the concept of self-persuasion requires that people develop an internal justification for the behavior they are asked to perform [Aronson; Geller(d)]. People attempt to keep their internal person state (like attitude) and external participation (or behavior) consistent. Thus, whether attitude or behavior is influenced first, the other will likely follow if the individual does not feel coerced.

Principle 2: People Reciprocate to Return a Favor

Have you ever felt uncomfortable after someone did you a favor—or turned down a favor because you didn’t want to feel obligated to return it? This is the reciprocity principle in action: When a person receives a favor, s/he feels obligated to return it. Research has shown that the favor might actually be returned to someone other than the original source (Berkowitz and Daniels). In safety management, this means that safety leaders should look for opportunities to go out of their way for other’s safety. When

individuals actively care for someone else’s safety, they set the tone for reciprocity—they increase the likelihood that the recipients of the caring will actively care for the safety of someone else.

How people react after receiving gratitude for their good deeds can either stifle or mobilize reciprocity. After one person thanks another for participating in a safety process, a common response is, “No problem” or “It was really nothing.” This trivializes the participation and inhibits reciprocity. A better reply is, “You’re welcome, but you’d do the same for me.” This activates the reciprocity principle in a way that is perceived as genuine and valid.

Gifts Aren’t Free

Has someone ever influenced you to listen to a sales pitch after giving you a free gift? Have you ever felt obligated to contribute to a charity after receiving individualized address labels and a stamped envelope for your check? Purchased a certain food in a supermarket after eating a free sample? Felt obliged to purchase a commodity after using it for a 10-day “free” trial period? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you likely have been influenced by the reciprocity principle. Many marketing and sales-promotion efforts count on this free-sample approach to influence purchasing behavior.

In one experiment, 84 percent of those individuals who found a dime in the coin-return slot of a public phone (placed there by researchers) helped a research accomplice pick up papers he dropped in the subject’s vicinity. In contrast, only four percent of those who did not find a dime helped the accomplice. Similarly, students given a cookie while studying at a university library were more likely than those not given one to agree to help another student (a research accomplice) by participating in a psychology experiment (Isen and Levin).

Does this justify the distribution of free safety gifts, such as pens, T-shirts, caps, cups and similar trinkets? To some extent, but the amount of reciprocity activated depends on the recipient’s perceptions. How special is the gift? Was it given to a select group or to everyone? Does the gift or its delivery represent significant sacrifice in money, time or effort? Can it be purchased elsewhere or does an imprinted slogan make it special? The more special the gift—as perceived by the recipient—the more reciprocity activated. Furthermore, the way a safety gift is presented can make a great difference. Labels and slogans linked with the gift can influence the quantity and quality of reciprocity activated. If the gift is presented to represent the participation expected from an “elite” group, a special type of reciprocity is energized. Recipients tell themselves they are considered safety leaders and need to justify this label by continuing their extra participation for the safety of others.

Door-in-the-Face: Start Big & Retreat

Suppose the plant safety director asks you to chair the safety steering committee for the next two years. Let’s assume you perceive this request as out-

rageous, given your other assignments and the fact you have never even served on such a committee. You reply, "Thanks for asking, but no." The safety director says he understands, then asks whether you would be willing to serve on the committee. According to social psychology research, because the safety director "backed down" from his initial request, you will feel subtle pressure to make a similar concession—to reciprocate—and agree to the less-demanding request [Cialdini(a)].

Cialdini, et al were among the first to demonstrate the power of this "door-in-the-face" technique. Posing as representatives of the "County Youth Counseling Program," they approached college students walking on campus and asked them to chaperon (unpaid) a group of juvenile delinquents on a day trip to the zoo. When this was the first and only request, only 17 percent of the students approached volunteered.

However, three times more students volunteered when the researchers first asked for a much larger favor. Specifically, they asked whether the students would be willing to counsel juvenile delinquents for two hours a week over a two-year period. Everyone refused this request, but half of them agreed to serve as unpaid chaperons for the zoo trip. Apparently, the researchers' willingness to retreat from their initial request influenced several students to reciprocate and comply with a smaller request (Cialdini, et al).

Principle 3: We Participate With People We Like

To whom do you feel most obligated after someone does you a good turn—a person you like or one you dislike? To whom are you more likely to give safety-related feedback—a team of workers you like or a team you dislike? The answers are obvious and reflect the basic liking rule. Because of this principle, it is critical to increase and sustain interpersonal liking when cultivating an actively caring work culture. Social psychologists have demonstrated three basic ways to establish a context of interpersonal liking, with each approach suggesting several specific strategies [Cialdini(a); (b)].

Emphasize Similarities

We like people who are like us. Through initial informal conversation and astute observation, people find commonalities with other people they want to influence. They might learn another person enjoys the same hobbies or recreational activities; has a parallel educational background or employment history; or has comparable opinions about current news stories, corporate issues or politics. People can forge a liking bond with others by discussing topics that accentuate interpersonal similarities. This principle comes into play when people modify their attire to be more acceptable to various audiences, such as dressing "up" or "down" to appear more like the group. Likewise, when an individual mentions acquaintances whom the other person knows and respects, s/he is showing the kind of similarity that can increase liking.

Figure 1

Seven Principles of Social Dynamics

Consistency

We resist change.
We act ourselves into certain thinking and vice versa.
We honor public, active and voluntary commitment.

Reciprocity

We return favors.
We are more likely to comply after retreating.

Ingratiation

We are attracted to similarities.
We like those who praise us and cooperate.
We actively care for the people we like.

Conformity

We follow those who are similar and credible.
We model most in unfamiliar situations.

Authority

We follow authority blindly and mindlessly.
We follow those with credibility.

Scarcity

We react to protect our individuality.
We value rare opportunities.
We are motivated to avoid loss.

Novelty

We habituate to the routine.
We are attentive and attracted to the unique.

Give Praise

Genuine one-to-one praise, recognition and rewarding feedback help increase an individual's competence and self-efficacy [Geller(a); (d); Allen(a); Daniels]. Praising someone's performance also increases liking—in both directions. The person rewarded likes the other person more, while the person giving praise increases appreciation for the person who performed the commendable behavior. This exchange enhances feelings of mutual respect and gratitude. Then, through the power of the reciprocity principle, one interaction of genuine behavior-based praise will lead to more interpersonal recognition.

Promote Cooperation

Social psychologists have tracked increases in interpersonal liking when individuals transition from competitive to cooperative situations [Aronson and Patnoe; Cialdini(b)]. People experience this change many times, from competitive participation in athletic contests to teamwork on community projects, and from competitive versus cooperative interaction on work assignments. The greater the perception of interdependency toward achievement of a common goal, the greater the interpersonal liking. This connects with the need to promote a sense of belonging and interdependency throughout a work culture—a key to attaining and sustaining an injury-free workplace [Geller(b); (f)].

Experienced employees should feel especially responsible to demonstrate safe work practices whenever new employees are present.

Principle 4: We Follow the Crowd

This is the principle of consensus or conformity [Asch(b)]. Examples of conformity are observed every day—from the types of clothes people wear to their style of communication. Producers of comedy shows use canned laughter to cause more audience laughter. Advertisers sell their wares by showing celebrities using their products.

Long lines help night clubs, movie theaters and restaurants attract customers. Thus, the role of conformity in influencing participation cannot be overlooked. Research has shown that greater pressure to conform occurs when the consensus group is larger [Asch(a); (c)] and when group members are seen as relatively experienced (Allison; Cialdini and Trost). Two other factors—similarity and familiarity—also affect conformity.

Similarity

The impact of similarity on conformity was dramatically shown when researchers went door-to-door to request charity donations and displayed a list of other contributors. Researchers varied this list from home-to-home and found that the longer list influenced more donations, verifying the effect of group size on conformity. In addition, when the donor list contained the names of those living in the same neighborhood, the size of the donations increased significantly, demonstrating the role of similarity in increasing the power of the conformity principle [Cialdini(b)].

Familiarity

When are people most likely to use the consensus principle? People are most likely to look to the behavior of others as a guide for their own behavior when in an unfamiliar situation [Allen(b); Baron, et al]. Therefore, experienced employees should feel especially responsible to demonstrate safe work practices when new employees are present. Similarly, supervisors should provide new hires opportunities to work with experienced, safety-minded employees. When these experienced employees have credible authority, the next social influence principle adds to the beneficial impact.

Principle 5: The Power of Authority

From childhood, people learn to appreciate and follow legitimate authority—they proceed from “mother knows best” to “boss knows best” (Milgram). This gives individuals an excuse to escape taking personal responsibility for their actions. In other words, if someone with authority asks employees to take a risk, they are often willing to comply because if something goes wrong, it will not be their fault—they can blame the person who told them to take the risk. It is easy to

see how this relates to workplace safety. Safety leaders need to be aware of the power of authority and must encourage people to resist the temptation to follow orders blindly and mindlessly.

Conformity & Authority

Authority and social conformity go hand-in-hand to affect participation in safety-related activities. The statement, “I was just following orders” reflects obedience to authority, while “everyone else does it” reflects conformity or peer pressure. SH&E professionals must realize the powerful impact of both factors and plan interventions to overcome their potential negative influence. Note that a person who deviates from the norm and sets a safe example can decrease undesirable conformity and mindless obedience to authority [Asch(b); Allen and Levine; Morris and Miller].

The Credible Authority

Given the impact of authority on participation, safety leaders must use this principle to their advantage. That is, safety leaders need to become legitimate authority figures who set safe examples [Geller(e)]. Here, the focus is a related—and crucial—factor: credibility.

What can leaders do to demand legitimate authority? Most obviously, they should post their diplomas, certificates or awards in appropriate locations (e.g., an office wall) to show relevant experience and credentials. This does not come across as boasting; rather it is a subtle way to let others know one’s specialties and skills.

People can also establish their domains of profound knowledge and competence through informal conversation. The talented communicator will reveal his/her credentials as a natural part of casual social exchange, without seeming to brag. It is best to offer such indirect and informal statements of expertise early in the “game.” The sooner people establish themselves as credible authorities, the sooner they can reap the benefits of this social influence principle.

Principle 6: The Value of Scarcity

Ever gone out of your way to purchase front-row tickets to a sporting event or concert? Jammed into a department store to get a “limited-time” bargain? Participated at an auction where one-of-a-kind items were displayed and sold to the highest bidder? Each of the situations implied by these questions illustrates how the value of something increases with perceived scarcity.

Reacting to Show Individuality

When individuality or perceived personal control is made scarce through top-down control, some people will exhibit contrary behavior in an attempt to assert their freedom. Social psychologists refer to this phenomenon as psychological reactance (Brehm), while behavior analysts call it countercontrol (Skinner). Regardless of its name, the results can be devastating to participation.

The author once met a person who wore safety frames—not safety glasses, only safety frames (he had removed the lenses). When a supervisor walked up the aisle, the employee would look right at him and wave. His coworkers lauded him for thumbing his nose at the system.

In this facility, employees perceived safety as a top-down mandate that restricted individual freedom. This worker increased his status in that culture by pushing against the system and demonstrating his independence. Thus, the command-and-control approach to occupational safety can make personal freedom seem scarce and hinder participation. When people perceive the system as restrictive, they may attempt to beat it. This principle indicates that true commitment and long-term participation cannot be dictated [Geller(d)].

The Special Opportunity

So what is the relevance of the scarcity principle in getting more people involved in a safety process? First, it suggests that the distinct features of a safety process should be emphasized. How is a particular approach to injury prevention better than the rest? How is it leading-edge? When people believe they have a rare opportunity to test a new approach to occupational safety, their motivation is enhanced by the scarcity principle.

For example, organizational leaders may wish to test a particular behavior-based approach to safety, yet are not ready to apply the process company-wide. Under these circumstances, the typical recommendation is to conduct a pilot program with a select group of employees (preferably a group with an above-average injury rate).

How can the scarcity principle be applied to motivate participation at a test site? Tell the group the truth. Explain that they have been selected to serve as the example for the rest of the company, that they have an unparalleled opportunity to demonstrate innovative ways to keep people safe. And, tell them they must act fast, because this “window of opportunity” is only open for so long. This latter point uses the scarcity principle in another way. It is not that the program is unique (or scarce), but that the opportunity to participate has limited duration.

Similarly, it can be beneficial to tell workshop audiences that their best opportunity to implement principles and procedures learned at a professional development conference is now—while the material is fresh and their organizations expect them to share and apply what they learned. As time passes, opportunities to use new information fade, because employees’ self-efficacy can diminish over time (Bandura). Furthermore, over time, management’s expectancy and obligation to consider a change will get buried by the familiar routine.

The Fear of Losing

The latter application of the scarcity principle focuses on what could be lost by failure to take advantage of a one-of-a-kind opportunity. Social psychologists have shown that people are especially

motivated to avoid a loss [Cialdini(b)]. When the need to act immediately to avoid a loss is evident, people are roused to mindful action. The power of this principle to motivate participation in safety-related activities can be seen when the potential loss is obvious (e.g., in personal-injury testimony) and when self-efficacy and response-efficacy are activated [Geller(b); (d)]. Under these conditions, the scarcity principle provokes desired behavior (Hale and Dillard; Witte and Allen).

The command-and-control approach to safety can make personal freedom seem scarce and hinder participation, as employees try to “beat the system.”

Principle 7: Novelty Attracts Attention

Defining novelty as “a change in stimulus conditions from previous experience,” behavioral scientists have demonstrated that novelty is rewarding—even to rodents (Bevins, et al 114; Bevins). Everyone has experienced this effect. Much like the influence of scarcity, the novelty principle is based on the finding that people are attentive and attracted to the quality of uniqueness. In this case, however, uniqueness means new or different rather than scarce or rare.

Interpersonal Relationships

Social psychologists have examined this principle with regard to interpersonal attraction and interrelationships (Baxter; Montgomery). More specifically, the novelty principle is reflected in people’s desire for excitement and surprise in their interpersonal experiences. The appeal of newness and unpredictability facilitates the beginning of a relationship, while the lack of it can be the key factor in the breakup of a relationship.

The impact of this principle on participation in safety is analogous to its influence on relationships. The uniqueness of a new approach to injury prevention promotes initial involvement; over time, however, the same routine can seem dull and uninspiring—prompting a decline in participation quantity and/or quality, particularly when participants do not experience consequences that support or verify their safety-related activities.

Intervention Implications

What can be done to overcome the loss of novelty and consequential participation? Most people have experienced the rise and fall of personal excitement with various fluctuations in novelty. Some have learned the value of incorporating the unexpected into a relationship. And everyone has seen the benefit of varying a work routine. In addition, most people have observed the power of adding relevant rewarding consequences to an everyday situation.

So, the recommended intervention approach is simple in principle, if not in practice: Find ways to add rewarding performance-relevant consequences

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for individuals and groups, and vary aspects of a particular safety process [Daniels; Geller(a); (g)].

Actually, changing the features of a safety process is essential for continuous improvement—and a mechanism for doing so should be established from the start. This usually requires the ongoing involvement of a safety steering committee that solicits and reviews employee suggestions for

program refinement, decides which suggestions to implement, then monitors their impact on the organization's overall injury-prevention process. Thus, the appropriate action of this committee not only supports the vision of "never-ending improvement," but also maintains a degree of novelty in safety-related activities.

Activator Salience

Safety signs, slogans and exhortations precede opportunities to perform certain safe or risky behaviors. As such, they attempt to activate desired performance among the workforce. Various aspects of these "activators" affect the degree to which they influence behavior [Geller(c)]. One critical determinant of activator impact—activator salience—relates directly to this discussion.

The influence of an activator varies directly with its noticeability—that is, more unique or novel activators are more noticeable. It is natural for activators such as sign messages to lose their impact over time; this process is called habituation and is considered by some psychologists to be the simplest form of learning (Chance). In other words, through habituation, people learn not to respond to an event that occurs repeatedly.

When an activator changes, it becomes more conspicuous. Various techniques can be employed to change the message on safety signs. Some have removable slats on which different messages can be placed. Others allow for the interchange of letters to allow maximum flexibility in a word display. Computer-generated signs offer an infinite number of options. Some facilities have video screens throughout that can broadcast various safety messages into breakrooms, lunchrooms, visitor's lounges and hallways.

The need to maintain novelty in these activators implies another important role for a safety steering committee. This group should collect suggestions from the workforce for changing safety activators and manage their recurring modification. This not only increases activator salience—through novelty—it also facilitates compliance with the safety message—through ownership. In other words, employees are more likely to notice and follow a safety activator when it varies periodically according to their input.

Conclusion

Achieving an injury-free workplace requires a transformation from dependency and independency to interdependency. It is not enough for workers to rely on their company to keep them safe solely through engineering intervention, nor is it sufficient for employees to only count on their own individual effort to keep them injury-free.

Rather, people need others to remove environmental hazards and provide corrective feedback on at-risk behavior. Such interdependency requires interpersonal interaction. The social dynamics of the situation determine whether such exchanges are likely to occur and whether their impact will be beneficial or detrimental to safety.

An organization's social dynamics both reflect and influence its culture. That is, certain aspects of a work setting affect social dynamics that in turn, alter the culture. The seven social influence principles described reveal basic social dynamics that can inhibit or facilitate participation for occupational safety (Figure 1, pg. 27).

People's desire to be consistent influences resistance to change. But when they choose to change even a little, the consistency principle can facilitate more commitment and more beneficial change. With this principle in effect, small increases in participation can result in supportive attitude change, followed by more participation and more desired attitude change.

When people actively care for others they activate three principles of social influence that foster more caring. Specifically, when employees go beyond the call of duty for a coworker's safety, they increase interpersonal liking (ingratiation principle) and induce a sense of obligation in that person to return the favor (reciprocity principle). They also set an example that spreads more caring behavior throughout the workplace (conformity principle).

The principle of authority illustrates that people may follow orders blindly and mindlessly. This becomes a barrier to occupational safety when a manager or supervisor asks a worker to perform an at-risk behavior.

On the other hand, those who are in positions of authority can have the opposite effect. In fact, their positive role-modeling and support of interdependency and actively caring are key to achieving an injury-free workplace.

Safety leaders realize the importance of increasing interpersonal liking throughout a workforce, and they understand the critical functions of praise, cooperation and perceived similarities in achieving this. They use behavior-based recognition to 1) support other people's participation in safety; 2) increase others' appreciation and respect for them; and 3) increase their own admiration for those whom they recognize.

The principle of scarcity explains why some employees actively resist complying with top-down safety rules, regulations and a quick-fix safety program. In some command-and-control work cultures,

noncompliance or nonparticipation reflects a personal statement of "freedom."

Employee involvement is much more likely with top-down support of safety processes that are developed, owned and continuously improved by employee teams which understand the rationale and relevancy of the principles behind them.

Highlighting the uncommon and rare aspects of a safety process uses the scarcity principle to fuel participation. Involvement in a new safety effort can be provoked by explaining how the "window of opportunity" for implementation is short and by specifying what can be lost if substantial participation is not forthcoming.

Finally, the novelty principle explains why safety messages lose their impact over time and why participation wanes when safety becomes repetitive. The inattention and disinterest that accompany the mundane occupational safety message and routine result from habituation.

To overcome this, safety activators and procedures should be intermittently modified or refined based on employee input, and supported with relevant consequences. When an employee safety team monitors and manages these ongoing changes, the entire process is fueled by another social dynamic—interpersonal ownership. ■

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