

Coaching: The Third Component of Safety Excellence

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In August 2015, I wrote about the four components of safety excellence. In the past few months I addressed the first two components: strategy and assessment. This month's column addresses the third component of safety excellence: coaching.

Coaching is the process by which one person helps another person improve performance. The results of individual coaching greatly are multiplied when a whole organization coaches. Each performer has help from everyone of higher ability or position, and the whole population improves its performance.

Coaching is the preferred management style of excellent organizations and the preferred observation style of truly excellent behavior-based safety processes. Lesser organizations pursue command-and-control styles and confrontational observations, which tend to view the worker as the problem to be controlled rather than the solution to be used. When safety systems seek to control workers, they tend to peak when they achieve a level of grudging compliance.

Coaching seeks to create willing cooperation among workers as they pursue their own personal bests. When the organization seeks to use and maximize the performance of its workers rather than to control it, excellence becomes possible. Most successful coaching models have four commonalities:

1. They set specific improvement targets rather than working on everything at once.
2. They seek to start desirable practices rather than stop undesirable ones.
3. They use feedback for positive reinforcement and to determine influences on performance.
4. They develop action plans to change influences on performance to align them with desired goals.

Coaching to improve overall performance has severe limitations. It can be overwhelming to both the coach and the performer. It tends to involve personal opinions rather than objective, measurable facts and therefore can become confrontational rather than helpful. The alternative is to set specific improvement targets and coach toward them.

Targeted improvement can create focus and alignment toward specific goals. Opinions give way to factual observation of improvement. Progress becomes measurable and meaningful. Success motivates more success.

Our average client is working on one to four targeted improvements at a time. These targets usually are identified through a Pareto analysis of previous accident and near-miss data. This means they are improvements with high potential impact on lagging indicators. Workers can see over time how their own improved performance translates into overall organizational improvement. As coaching becomes the management and observation style, improvement becomes the symbol of success.

"Less Bad" Is Not Good

It is critical improvement targets be stated as safe practices to be started vs. bad practices to be stopped. Improvement should not be described as "less bad."

Behavioral tools used to start behaviors fit the coaching model much better than the tools to stop behaviors. The starting tools also tend to strengthen relationships and culture, whereas the stopping tools tend to weaken them. Whether it is a manager or supervisor coaching a worker or a fellow worker doing behavioral observations, the goal should be to get better rather than to be less bad.

When improvement goals are set as taking certain precautions or following particular safety steps, the measurement of such goals can be accomplished by observation, and the results stated as a percent of success. As success is achieved in behavioral performance, it becomes motivational to workers who see themselves winning the game of safety.

If the goal of coaching is to improve performance, the coaching feedback given should support that goal. Unfortunately, most feedback in safety is confrontational, i.e. pointing out what a worker is doing unsafely. This form of fault finding seldom results in meaningful or lasting change. We have begun to realize over the past decade that people do things for a reason. If we don't know the reason, we don't truly understand the behavior. If we fail to understand what is influencing current behavior, we will likely fail to establish a sustaining environment for a new behavior.

It is imperative feedback take two approaches. If we set an improvement target and observe the worker doing what we have targeted, we must give positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement simply is pointing out the positive behavior and encouraging the worker to continue it. If the worker is not doing the targeted improvement, we must find out why. Discovering the reason is more important than confrontation, criticism or even attempting to force a change of behavior on the spot. Such forced changes almost always are temporary at best.

If the coaches, whether they are supervisors or peer observers, do their job of finding out why targeted behaviors are not happening, then this last step is fairly straight forward.

Action Plans to Change Influences

If we know what is influencing workers to do other than our targeted improvements, we must develop action plans to change these influences. These plans can take several approaches: they can attempt to remove influences to take risks, add influences to take targeted precautions or a combination of the two.

The influences fall into two categories. The first is internal influences such as simply forgetting, disagreeing with the targeted change or falling back into old habitual behaviors. Action plans can include training to convince workers of the wisdom of the change, or simply reminders that help workers stay aware until they can change habits. The second is external influences in the workplace or culture. These may require physical changes, changes in common practice or new procedures. It is important to measure and monitor the impact of action plans to ensure they actually result in behavioral change and that the behavioral change produces an improvement in lagging indicators.

Organizational excellence in performance is not just about leadership and direction; it is about followership by workers who continuously improve. Only a coaching model of management and behavioral observations can produce and sustain such improvement. Organizations that fail to coach will find workers only perform well when directly supervised. Behavior-based safety programs that fail to coach find that reducing the

number of observations quickly lowers the percentage of safe behaviors. Both of these problems are solved when organizations adopt this coaching model as their official management and observation style.

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