Safety and Motivation

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When you think about your organization's safety efforts, does the thought motivate or de-motivate you?

Does safety motivate you or de-motivate you? This is a question I often ask in workshops and am amazed how demotivating most safety programs are perceived to the workforce. Leaders constantly ask how they can get workers more engaged in safety efforts and form the kind of culture that will sustain excellent safety performance. A partial answer to this question is to make safety more motivating.

Motivation currently is not a hot topic in most businesses. Over-marketing of reward and incentive programs and the swarm of books on the subject during the past two decades dulled its appeal. The basic idea of motivation as some kind of hyperactive energy boost to employees was unrealistic and largely replaced by the concept of identifying and controlling the factors that influence workplace performance. The books about motivation evolved into books about influence and the new goal is to align and shape performance rather than supercharge it.

Whether you attempt to control what you call motivators or influences, successfully doing so should elicit a degree of enthusiasm from workers. If it does not, the program and overall effort of safety is swimming against the current of culture. In such cases, safety efforts tend to be minimal and grudging. Workers practice a degree of safety to avoid negative consequences or labeling, not to help the organization achieve true excellence. The safety culture is one of compliance, not collaboration. Even if hands and feet move, the hearts and minds of workers are not engaged. Safety has a "have to" rather than a "want to" culture and all the potential altruism is stifled.

Slow Creep of De-Motivators

Interestingly, most leaders do not de-motivate safety efforts deliberately. They simply allow de-motivators to creep into their management style and communication. Workers begin to receive negative messages, which build up over time and defeat motivation. Some leaders simply don't view motivation as a part of their job description and therefore, don't try. Others fail to realize that many employees come to work motivated, and all that's needed is to quit beating it out of them before they leave. When I ask workers to give me specific instances in which they felt most de-motivated, I regularly get the following three answers:

First, workers feel de-motivated when they feel separated from leaders. This happens when they don't receive timely, detailed information or have regular contact with leaders. Many organizations grow too big or scattered for leaders to have periodic face time with workers, but motivational leaders make use of new technologies to make that contact happen. Leaders can get busy and lose track of how often they communicate with workers, or simply not make such contact a priority.

One leader was recognized for the successful performance of a safety team that had been formed to address a specific safety concern. He asked the team what he could give them as a reward and they only asked for information about the company. He stated in some awe that he did not realize how hungry workers were for

meaningful communication.

The second most mentioned de-motivator is about control. Workers who feel manipulated or micro-managed have difficulty remaining motivated.

Control and trust are perceived as inversely proportional. Too much control is interpreted as a lack of trust in workers to do the right thing and to do it safely. Over control also can be demeaning. Step-by-step oversight is what parents give to small children, not what good leaders give to trusted workers.

Recent studies have touted autonomy as one of the greatest motivators for workers whose jobs require any degree of cognitive tasks. Control removes autonomy and destroys the great motivational potential it can provide. Again, most leaders are not deliberately trying to de-motivate; they simply are trying to exercise control. They don't realize that less control actually can be more if workers take initiative and require less oversight to produce better performance. In fact, enlightened leaders report that a motivated and autonomous workforce is the pinnacle of control.

The third most-mentioned de-motivator closely is related to the first two. It is when input from the workforce is ignored. In some instances, worker input isn't ignored; there is just no channel to collect it in the first place. Some leaders don't elicit or accept input from workers. In other instances, the suggestion box or other mechanism for gathering worker ideas and suggestions becomes a symbol of insincerity. It is black hole into which genuine suggestions go and from which nothing ever returns.

W. Edwards Deming said that the greatest expertise in an organization was found in the people most intimately involved in the work; that almost always is the worker. Certainly, safety experts need to ensure compliance with regulatory agencies, and leaders and managers should ensure adherence to company policy and intent, but workers should be involved in the tactics of safe work. Where workers cannot give input or where their input is not utilized, theory and practice begin to separate. Workers view new safety rules and guidelines as impractical and not in touch with the reality of the workplace. Dangers are known to workers, but not addressed by leaders until they produce accidents. Ignoring worker input drives many reactive safety practices and blocks the best path to meaningful proactivity.

Motivation is not the main goal of a safety program, but it is a tool without which the highest levels of excellent safety performance are not possible. De-motivated workers give grudging compliance but not willing cooperation. Overly controlled workers comply but don't excel. Worker input through suggestions is a remarkable pool of improvement possibility that will be untapped if motivation is lacking. Improving motivation for safety may be as simple as regular communication, increased autonomy and letting the folks who do the work tell you how it could be done safer.

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