Thinking differently: How progress begins

How can jokes and stories shape your direction in improving safety performance and culture? In most organizations, they already do. A few months ago, I started my day like many others, having breakfast in a hotel. I was staying at a Hampton Inn in Iowa while working with a client. At 6 a.m., when the breakfast area opened, I started my routine. It is quite normal to be the only one there that early, and even if you aren’t, you tend to eat alone. As I was finishing my meal, with only a few bites remaining, an older gentleman walked up to my table and said, “Oh, you are eating alone?” While in hindsight this sounds quite kind, I was a little perplexed by the question. I always eat alone when traveling for business if I’m the only one from the ProAct Safety team on the engagement. I looked up and responded, “Yes, sir.” He immediately asked if he could join me, and I invited him to do so.

Never one to miss an opportunity to engage in a conversation, especially with someone who reminded me of my grandfather who passed long ago, we began talking. He was from Minnesota, where my wife is from, so we had an instant connection and much to discuss. It was finally time for me to depart, and after I thanked him for the conversation, he stopped me with, “Wait, I have a question for you.” I couldn’t help but be skeptical. Was this a setup for something? Was there something he was attempting to pitch to me, thus the reason for engaging me in conversation?

“How many seconds are there in a year?” he asked. I began thinking, “Well, there are 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour, 24 hours ...” No, not really; I didn’t do the math. It was clear I had a perplexed look on my face, so he proudly stated, “It’s a trick question. There are only 12. January second, February second, March second ...” I laughed, and he urged me to tell this joke to my daughters when I returned home, which I did.

Jokes and stories have great power. They nudge you to think differently about something, which is how all progress begins. What thinking is common in your organization that helps you transform performance? What thinking becomes a constraint? How can you break through?

Depending on the culture among the leadership team, jokes are not always the appropriate thought-change mechanism, but stories almost universally are.

Every organization I’ve ever consulted with can go back in its history and tell stories of the past, how work was performed and decisions that led to change. By helping executives change their decision-making process through coaching and consulting on both day-to-day as well as overall strategic decisions regarding culture and safety performance, we do what we call “maturing safety excellence thinking” with leaders. While a minority of individuals are persuaded by facts and figures, the majority are influenced by stories and pictures.

What stories can you tell to change how people view safety and its role in the organization? What stories can help them recognize safety adds value to production rather than competes with it? What stories can help redefine safety excellence, how others have achieved it, what it takes to achieve it and who is responsible for what? If you aren’t monitoring the storytelling and jokes told about or within safety, your efforts will be managed by it. When these simple perspectives around improving safety are outdated, it holds back leadership teams from striving for greatness. If the goal is a new step change in safety performance rather than seeking out the next program or process, work to mature the safety excellence thinking within your organization.

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