



Change is inevitable, support is not

One of the main reasons people resist change is a lack of understanding behind the motive for the change. While working with an organization throughout Europe and the Middle East, I was exposed to an example of 10 leaders who communicated poorly, and one who found a path to change success.

Excellence does not happen through blind compliance.

In 2009 on a cold, windy winter evening at one of their facilities, a long-term employee dressed in dark clothing and his head covered with a hood, had just entered the roadway after walking between two buildings. He was, unfortunately, struck by a reversing delivery truck. The facility had just changed traffic patterns, rerouting the incoming flow from entering from the left, to reversing from the right. It was believed the employee did not hear the reversing alarm coming from the vehicle. Moreover, it is likely the individual habitually looked left where traffic previously came from.

While certainly not the root cause, the organization believed reflective vests would have aided in the driver seeing the pedestrian. As a result, the organization immediately decided to institute a gate-to-gate policy of reflective vests at all of their facilities. Six months after the fatality, I was asked to conduct cultural assessments at 11 of their locations. While reflective vest compliance was not on my immediate radar of focus, I did quickly notice a very low level of compliance and support for the new rule throughout the company.

While visiting a location in Ireland, however, I quickly noticed 100-percent compliance with the rule. During group interviews, I indicated a strong support for the policy. One lady stated (in a wonderfully thick Irish accent), "Wearing the vests is just a thing we do. In the mornings, after brushing my teeth, I put on my vest and head to work. I guess it has become a habit." I was insatiably curious to determine why this site had been able to accomplish what the others could not. The answer soon became clear: effective communication.

Patrick, the safety manager at this loca-

tion, was close friends with the safety manager at the site where the fatality occurred and had personally known the individual whom had lost his life. When Patrick was instructed to implement the new rule, he met with employees in small groups across all crews in the organization. He showed the groups a picture of the employee who had lost his life and his family members. Patrick then stressed how he knows many of his sites' employees' families and never wants to be in the position of his friend, having to tell a family their father would no longer be coming home.

Patrick took the time out of his already overwhelming work load to emphasize in a compassionate tone that the organization truly believes a reflective vest could have been enough of a prevention tactic to have stopped the chain of events from turning out the way they did. The reason for acceptance for change on this rule was clear, and Patrick made the reason for the change personal.

Communicating effectively is difficult. As a result, a common perception that tends to exist is employees feel most communication to the work force for safety-related initiatives is general, basic or even nonexistent. It is to

be expected this results in employees not supporting, understanding or having any sense of ownership in approaches to improve safety or other areas of operational excellence.

Excellence does not happen through blind compliance. We *do* want our employees to think and question things they do not understand. For this, they need access to information. While it is not always possible or practical for employees to be involved in all changes, it is critical for support that they understand, at minimum, the rationale. They might not always like the change, but that's a subject for another article.

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