



Creating a culture of have to or want to?

Henry Ford once said, “Why is it every time I ask for a pair of hands, they come with a brain attached?” The point in time has passed where leaders did, indeed, want their workers to hang their brain at the door and do as they were told.

It is a different world we live in. Information is more readily available, our attention span and working memory are decreasing, our desire for frequent positive

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reinforcement is increasing, and studies indicate humans respond emotionally to change before responding logically. With these evolutions, the practices of the past to obtain compliance with rules, policies, procedures and personal protective equipment edicts will decrease in effectiveness.

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improve it. However, without a sense of ownership and a firm understanding of why the rules are in place, or why we execute certain improvement initiatives, we might move hands and feet but rarely capture the essential hearts and minds for sustainable progress.

All parents have experienced their toddlers perpetual questioning, “Why?” If your only reply is, “Because I said so,” what follows? More questions. Humans, by nature, are deeply curious about all things. We seek knowledge and want to understand the world around us and our place within it. When exposed to new information, our brains respond determining if the experience is similar to previous ones or not. When it is new or unfamiliar, if not fearful, we are at minimum curious even if there is no obvious benefit to us.

There is, however, significant benefit in safety excellence and what we ask of people to achieve it. But, if the benefits aren’t apparent and only the business rationale for safety improvement efforts are communicated, are we content with a culture of mindless compliance? Surely not, for then

there is no learning and progression in the thinking processes vital for cultural growth.

“Do it or else,” policing for safety and “because I said so” rules may start safety at the entrance gate; the problem with this is safety ends at the gate, too. When individuals are expected to mindlessly comply, there is no guarantee the desired behavior will be created or sustained in the absence of leaders. What people do when no one is looking tests the effectiveness of edicts.

Consider speed limit signs and the disregarding behavior of speeding. If a speeding driver observes a police officer on the side of the road, what behavior typically follows? They slow down. What occurs after the police officer is no longer visible in the rear-view mirror? They speed back up. What happens if the speeder is pulled over and issued a ticket for the errors of their ways? Do they forever stop speeding? Or, do they drive to the nearest electronics store and purchase a radar detector to be better at not getting caught?

We don’t want people behaving in a way to just not get caught. If people don’t see such value in the rules or even requests

to go beyond compliance in safety, increasing mandates and threats will have a limiting or even opposite effect of disinterest and disengagement. If we want employees at all levels to see value in what we do to improve safety, we must treat those affected by safety improvement efforts as the customers of the initiative, not the targets. Unless, of course, you are satisfied with creating a culture of have-to rather than want-to thinking.

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