



## Negative safety feedback: Demotivated and devalued

How sick and tired are you of all the positive feedback you receive at work? Most people are rarely praised for their performance or results. Yet, we all see the value of positive feedback in our personal lives. For some reason, though, we often forget to leverage this powerful motivational tool. Even worse, we might not realize the disastrous impact its absence can have on a culture.

Last year, I was assessing the occupational culture of a very large population. Among many other things, a comprehensive culture assessment includes individual and focus group interviews of the population across all shifts, departments and levels. To create trust and a free-flowing sense of autonomy, I prefer to keep the levels separated. This typically facilitates the willingness of individuals to share openly what is working well or not working well and, most importantly, why.

While this site had historically been among the best in safety in their large organization, their results were regressing. During one focus group session with a group of hourly employees, the topic

progressed to safety feedback. It quickly became clear their previous safety improvement progress was made through threats, fear and intimidation. While I have experience leading hundreds of culture assessments, I learn something new with each engagement. Moreover, occasionally I will experience something that forever remains in my memory.

I remember this like it was yesterday. A woman in the session stated, "In three months, I will be retiring after 30 years here at this site. The only time I've ever been talked to about safety, or called into the management's office for a safety discussion, is when I have done something wrong. Just once before I retire, I wish they would tell me when I have done something right." This was a theme expressed in most of the groups and in most of the levels in the hierarchy. It seemed the biggest contributor to the slip in performance was an increase in apathy. Excellence in any performance category will be an elusive goal if the population is demotivated and feels devalued.

How unfortunate such an experienced

worker has only negative memories about safety feedback. Experiences shape the stories told within a culture and these stories, over time, have a norming effect on the beliefs that drive decisions and behaviors. What percentage of the feedback you receive about safety is positive versus negative? What about those who work for or with you? What experiences are shaping the belief management truly cares about the safety and wellbeing of the population? Do people seek out performance feedback in safety or avoid it like the plague?

In defense of the managers and supervisors at this location, they are not horrible people. They were just unaware of how their leadership style came across to the work force. Command and control approaches certainly can be situationally appropriate. If there is uniform deviation from standardized policy, rules or procedures, there is little time for cajoling and collaboration. Any leadership style will have special uses and what works to get one level of performance will not necessarily work for further progress.

This site is on a long road to safety culture recovery and the steps they are now taking are demonstrating very positive progress. Paradigm and culture change takes time, and there are a lot of negative experiences and stories to overcome. Leadership at this site has come to realize it will be an intrinsically motivated work force that will dominate the market share. If a work force feels demotivated and devalued, people will do the minimal necessary to get by. When there is a sense of "want to" rather than "have to," much more is possible. Providing positive feedback may sound like a soft skill, but it has certainly proven to produce hard results.

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