IMPROVING SAFETY BY OVERCOMING THE FEAR FACTOR – 11 PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

We need to get to the heart of the matter. Why do people go ahead with jobs when they KNOW they shouldn't? Their training, procedures and commonsense tell them things are not as safe as they could be. So why do they “override” all this?

One reason is FEAR. Here's a list of some of the fears people mention when explaining why they sometimes go ahead when conditions are unsafe.

* Afraid to be seen as lazy
* Afraid to be seen as a trouble maker
* Afraid of looking stupid
* Afraid to admit that they don't understand
* Afraid to be seen as incompetent
* Afraid to be seen as weak
* Afraid of upsetting work mates
* Afraid of losing their jobs

I'm sure you recognise some or all of these fears having, like me, experienced a few yourself. How these fears inhibit safety is self-explanatory. However, let's look at a few concrete examples to put fear into context and then go on to see how we can reduce fear and therefore accidents.

A man cut his finger badly because he was trying to complete a job so as not to leave it for his nightshift colleagues. He wasn't lazy - he was afraid to be seen to be lazy.

In the behavioural safety workshops I facilitate, comments like these sometimes arise: "All this stop the job business is fine, but what if I stop the job and I'm wrong?" "I know nothing about drilling so what right do I have to stop them?"

Can you see how the fear of looking stupid could prevent people stopping unsafe acts?

A service engineer split his thumb lifting a 45kg low-torque valve. Although he knew it was silly to do lift that weight he didn't want to appear weak to others around him.
A technician caused a platform shutdown when the drawings were difficult to read. He knew he should have referred to the manual but didn't ask to see it in case his boss would deem him incompetent.

One member of a crew suggested using lifting equipment to reduce manual handling of a heavy load. However, it was about 10 minutes to the evening meal and his mates were annoyed with him suggesting that it would be okay for two of them carry it. He backed down, went ahead with the lift and pulled his back muscles.

ISN'T IT A GREAT PITY that people are hurt because of these fears?

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WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR IMPROVING SAFETY?
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It means that in addition to brilliant procedures, training, ergonomics and equipment, we must find ways to fight the fear factor. The 11 practical suggestions that follow are just a start. I'm sure from your own experience and knowing your people and workplace you'll be able to develop other suggestions. Some suggestions may seem trite or a bit fuzzy. We're dealing with human emotions and perceptions and as you probably guessed there is no magic wand.

1. In workshops and meetings make the fear factor explicit.
Bring out into the open that people get hurt because of fear. Explain how everyone from the most junior employee to the most senior manager experiences these fears in varying degrees. Let people express the fact that they're afraid sometimes when they follow the rules because of what others will think of them or do to them. The very act of making the fear explicit and airing it is part of the solution.

2. Explain to people that at least 80 percent of their fear is unjustified.
We have been conditioned from an early age to fear people's reactions. Putting the football through a window resulted in a thrashing. Making a mistake in school resulted in the belt. Unfortunately, for many of us, this conditioning continued into our first experiences of the workplace. In discussions, get people to reflect on how far we've come in the workplace and how rare it is that people get fired merely for expressing views strongly or making silly mistakes. With conditioned fear you just have to believe it's unjustified and "sail through" it. Unless you do this you'll always be affected by your own unjustified fear and may be tempted to work unsafely.

3 Encourage people to persist and take things further.
What should people do when their fear is justified? What if you know for sure that your current supervisors is a "dinosaur" and will hold it against you if you argue for safety? What if you know for sure that your mates will mock you or, even worse, ostracise you if you insist on working to safety rules. There is a three-part solution here.

* First, show people the terrible decision they're making: to work unsafely because they may lose their job or because their mates won't speak to them. That's the stark choice. No person should have to make it.. Ask people, "Are you really going to endanger your health, life and income because of unacceptable attitudes of others?"

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Don't try and sell this too hard - all you can do is sow the seed and show that giving into the fear could have very bad consequences.

** Second, encourage people to persist in a calm, non-insulting way. If someone is being pressured by their supervisor to do something they think is unsafe and the supervisor is not listening to objections, I advise people to say something like this. "We really want to get this job done tonight but I'm very worried we might hurt someone because etc etc etc. Let's just run through the risk assessment once more to make sure we've covered everything that could hurt us".

Don't argue. Use the brilliant risk assessment tool - it gives facts and stops heated augments based on perceptions of safety.

*** Third, if the supervisor does not accept the need for another risk assessment, encourage people to get others involved. Depending on circumstances, it could be the safety representative, the HSE adviser or even a more senior manager. As you know, people are very reluctant to "leap frog" their supervisor or manager. In addition, from an early age, we are taught that "telling tails" is bad. Hard experience has taught many of us that if you do this, the organisation closes ranks and we're out of a job – even if we're right! All you can do is explain to people that times have changed and your worksite/company welcomes people who "tell tales" for safety. I know this last suggestion sounds totally naïve – but what else is there?

4. Accept that the fear factor is higher and more influential than you think.
Keep remembering the hindering effects of fear. When introducing a new procedure, rule or initiative, think about where the fear could creep in and then discuss this with people – make it explicit. Remember that just because you are the boss, people are afraid of you. They will do things to keep on your right side.

5. Set the example.
Make a point of following the rules and tell people you are following the rules. For example, "I'd like to get this finished before lunch but if I hurry I'll probably hurt myself. To be safe we better leave it until after lunch". A corny example, but you get the point. Praise people if they catch you not following the rules. Make opportunities to stop jobs - especially when it costs money. Then broadcast as widely and as often as possible that you HAVE STOPPED the job.

6. Watch the way you speak to people.
I know I'm preaching to the converted so I'll keep this short. People will do just about anything to avoid looking stupid or feeling belittled. So, if a supervisor's or manager's style (not yours of course!) is to shout, criticise or mock in public, people will not own up that they don't understand or that they have a safety concern or a better idea for doing the job more safely.

7. Give positive reinforcement all the time.
Make the mental effort to remember to praise people as much as possible for stopping jobs and bringing up ideas for even safer working. Never shoot down an idea for safety. If a suggestion is not practical, say something like, "Thanks George it's good that you raise these safety ideas - lets' think about that a bit". Then later explain carefully with good reasons why you're not implementing it. Keep saying things like the following to your team: "There's no such thing as a stupid question - thanks for
raising it". And "There's no such thing as a wrong stop – all stops are good".

8. Think before you react.
When you hear of a job being delayed or a piece of machinery breaking its natural and easy to show your anger and frustration. However, make sure the people around you know it's NOT them you are angry with.

9. Avoid threatening people with loss of their jobs.
I know the "olden days" are gone and hardly anyone is openly threatened in this way. However, about 15 out of 100 people who attend my workshops say they're still worried about losing their jobs if they push for safety. This fear is still strong with ad hoc contracting personnel. We have to do more to explain to people that their fear is ungrounded. So, don’t even joke about "There's no barbed wire on the helideck (or factory gate)".

10. Show that you will support people.
If, unfortunately, a safety disagreement gets serious and eventually reaches your desk show people that you treat it seriously and that you'll take action. As you know, this requires very sensitive handling. If the employee is right you don't want the supervisor to lose face. Make it look as if you've given the supervisor information he didn't have before. So it's not a back down but an adjustment. In blatant cases of poor supervision maybe we need to be upfront and honest about it.

11. Coach your supervisors.
If you're a manager take the time to coach your junior managers and supervisors. As you know, supervisors are good people and they get the job done. Use the material in this Safety Briefing in informal discussions.

In summary
People's fears – our fears, real or perceived, are hurting them - us. The fear factor will never disappear - it is, after all, our survival mechanism. However, in the workplace we can and should get it to such low levels that a person will never again feel stupid or a trouble maker when following their company's procedures the client's rules and their own commonsense judgement.

I’ve covered a lot of ground in this Briefing but you can gain more valuable suggestions for overcoming fear in a special e-Report. You can see the contents at http://www.safetyimprovers.com/e-reports/safety-leadership/

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