

## Reflecting on Safety

### Assessing Safety Programs Then and Now: Part 2 (Now)

By Gary A. Higbee

Last week, I described the advice I gave 20 years ago to help organizations assess the quality of their safety programs. Back then, I believed there were five stages that an organization passes through on its journey to attaining world class safety performance:

- Realization
- Traditional
- Observation
- Empowerment
- Utopia



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I still believe in the five stages. But I'm older and wiser now. So, if you'll indulge me, I'd like to refine what I said back then based on what I've learned in the past 20 years. **[Editor's Note: SafetyXChange members can download from Tools a graphical representation of these two views.]**

## The Weak Link of a Safety Program

The refinements I mention relate principally to the fourth stage: Empowerment. As you recall, that's the stage when management and employees share responsibility for risk assessment and injury prevention. This is also the point at which employees have become aware of risk factors and developed "habit strength" for effective safe behaviors.

When I first described this stage, I made a misjudgment about "habit strength." More precisely, I made an assumption that I now realize is flawed. Under normal situations, habit strength does result in safe behaviors. But what I failed to recognize is that this isn't *always* true and that safe habits break down when individuals are under stress.

## A Moment of Revelation

This bit of wisdom first struck me when I was performing an audit at a manufacturing facility. I was observing a forklift operator who I knew was particularly good at his craft. He always wore his seatbelt and never set a load at the production line without clearing the employees. When he entered a trailer at the loading dock he always inspected the trailer and assured the wheels were caulked. He just did everything right.

In the afternoon, I noticed some extra activity on the production line. The line was going down because of a missing part that was stored outside in a trailer that was stuck in the snow. The assembly line employees were incentive workers and they didn't want the line to go down because it would cost them money.

***Editor's Note: Next week, in the final article of the series, Gary discusses the fourth R of committee success: Results.***

Just 30 seconds before the line was to go down, the truck was freed from the snow and backed to the dock. The same forklift driver that I had admired for his impeccable work and safety habits jumped onto his forklift, drove into the trailer and got the load. He placed the load on the line and everyone cheered.

The problem was he didn't fasten his seatbelt, the trailer was not caulked and if the truck driver had pulled forward to reset the trailer, who knows what might have happened. The forklift operator's habit strength was lost in an instant.

### **My Revised Viewpoint - From 5 Stages to 3 Attributes**

This incident gave me pause and caused me to rethink. The many safety programs I have observed over the years have had the same effect. The product of this is a more mature and simplified theory.

My theory has morphed from five stages to three attributes. In other words, there are three attributes that all world-class safety programs have. Now, I judge the effectiveness of a safety program by determining if it has those attributes:

#### **1. Traditional Safety Program**

Yes, I still believe you must have a strong traditional safety program. This includes written programs, policies and procedures and ensuring that these policies and procedures are followed. You can assess your own traditional safety program by auditing them to set standards. You can do this internally or use an outside auditor. It's a simple way to look at what you say you're doing and see if you are actually doing it. Most of us have a lot of work to do just to get our traditional programs up to snuff.

#### **2. Observation Programs**

This is a combination of the observation and empowerment stages from the five stages theory. Companies with first-rate safety programs have an observation process to watch for at-risk behaviors. It's not an audit program, but a behavioral observation process that involves both employees and management. There needs to be teamwork.

Workers on the floor are encouraged to perform safety observations on a peer-to-peer basis. They're also encouraged to accompany the supervisor and safety director on their rounds. What are they looking for? Three things:

- Whether workers know how to do their jobs
- Whether workers have the tools necessary to perform their tasks safely
- Whether there are any gaps in the system.

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Workers observed committing at-risk behaviors are not disciplined, but engaged in discussion whose purpose is to correct the observed at-risk behavior.

With an observation program, you're reinforcing safe behaviors and intervening when at-risk behaviors are observed. This process develops 'habit strength.'

### **3. Advanced Training**

We wouldn't expect a person who's never played golf before to read a golf rulebook and suddenly become a pro. We understand that the person would have to be taught about the game and shown how to play it

It's the same with employees. Employees need advanced safety skills and safety awareness training. In order for the traditional and observation programs to be successful, employees must be taught the skills that will keep them safe when the system breaks down. They need practical, relevant and easy-to-understand skills to manage themselves effectively. Without this, the system will continue to fail under stress, because some will lose the habit strength.

This recognition is what was missing from my original five stages theory.

### **Conclusion**

After 20 years, I still believe that world-class safety performance is not just the dream of some wide-eyed college graduate or recently appointed safety manager. It is a very attainable goal. But it takes a commitment to have a strong traditional safety program, an ongoing observation program to catch gaps and advanced safety skills and safety awareness training for all employees.

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