

# Crucial Skills for safety

## “THE SAFETY OPERATING SYSTEM”

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### THE PROBLEM

“Accidents are just the price you pay for productivity”. We heard this over and over again in the 1970’s, 80’s and even into the 90’s. Fortunately, we seldom hear it today. “Safety First” is now the most often heard mantra in industry around the world. You would be hard pressed to find any successful company that does not have a “safety system” in place. There has been a shift in “attitude” about safety in the workplace over the past 20+ years. Safety was initially driven by pressure from outside the organization (i.e., economics, customers, governments). Companies’ feared loss of customers, increased insurance premiums, and/or government penalties. While there is still pressure from outside the organization to improve safety, we have also seen a major shift to a more intrinsic desire on the part of management to protect their people, their equipment and the environment because it is the right thing to do. Over the past couple of decades these pressures have forced industries to take a closer look at safety, which has led to attempts to:

- Engineer the workplace to make it safer by improving equipment, procedures and systems.
- Improve employee motivation, attitude, knowledge and skills related to safety.



These efforts have helped reduce private industry workplace injury rates in the U.S. by an average of 44% from 1976 to 2002, while impacting the most dangerous industries (e.g., oil field services and construction) by as much as 78% over the same time period. This improvement in safety performance didn’t just happen by chance. Rather, a series of “safety nets” were put into place that has helped prevent many incidents. For example, *hazard analysis and risk control assessments* help identify where incidents can occur for specific tasks and put into place a set of remedies to control those hazards. While such systems can be very useful in identifying potential unsafe events, they do not in and of themselves prevent accidents. This is because, while people may be aware of hazards and how to control them, they don’t always implement those controls. Other programs (e.g., DuPont STOP, behavior based safety, etc.) have introduced methods for observing unsafe behavior in the workplace, recording and charting observations, and giving feedback on those observations in an attempt to change behavior. The problem is that even with these

efforts (and many others) we are still having incidents that are causing damage to equipment and the environment, and more importantly, pain and suffering to workers. The questions we need to ask are “*Why are we still having incidents?*” and “*What must we do to eliminate them?*”

## THE SOLUTION

The short answer to why we are still having incidents is, “*people are still behaving in an unsafe manner*” in spite of the safety programs already in place. Many governments require auto makers to include seat belts in their cars and police give tickets for not wearing those seat belts, but you can still find drivers and passengers not wearing these safety devices. Engineering and policy don’t ensure that people will act safely. There are two main reasons for this. One reason is that there are many stimuli (we call them *activators*) that can lead a person to behave in either a safe or an unsafe manner. The activator that carries the most “weight” for the person in a particular situation will determine what behavior the person will engage in. For example, I get in my car, hear the annoying little bell going off to remind me to buckle my seat belt, remember that I am very late for my next appointment and put the car in gear without fastening my seat belt. In this case I let the “hurry” activator override the other activators (e.g., the bell, thoughts of getting hurt, fear of a traffic fine, etc.) and I engage in an unsafe action.

The second reason that people don’t always act safely is related to their perception of the potential *consequences* of their actions. Getting to that appointment on time, especially if it might impact my revenue, is perhaps a stronger

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consequence than the “slight” possibility that I might be in an accident. My perception of the potential consequences has a great impact on my current and future actions. One of the things we have noticed over the years is that unsafe actions almost always appear to be easier (i.e., require less effort, time, energy, etc.) than do safe actions. Think about it. What takes more energy, buckling-up or not buckling-up? Taking a short cut or going the long way to avoid a hazard? Looking for your safety glasses, or just getting the job done without them? Because of this, we find that it is by nature more difficult to get safe actions than unsafe actions. Most safety programs don’t totally eliminate incidents for four main reasons:

- They don’t make it easier to behave safely than unsafely
- They don’t identify and control *activators*
- They don’t make the *potential consequences* clear to their employees
- They don’t consistently hold people *accountable* for unsafe actions

This leads us to the second part of the question that we asked earlier: “*What must we do to eliminate unsafe actions?*”

The short answer here is, “*control activators and consequences by holding people accountable for their actions.*” You’re thinking to yourself, “Yeah, right, easier said than done!” Many activators are mental, such as memories of past consequences and thoughts about possible future consequences. While supervisors and managers don’t have direct control over the thoughts of their employees, they do have input into their thoughts by what they emphasize. For example, we may talk about safety, but then through our actions and body language, we

actually push getting things done quickly? In this case, the primary activator becomes “hurry” rather than “be safe;” and when people hurry, they tend to do what is easiest, which, as we have already discussed, tends to be the unsafe action. Supervisors and managers do have direct control over what knowledge their employees have about possible consequences and whether unsafe actions are confronted appropriately. We have found in our consulting work that one of the main differences between supervisors who don’t have many incidents under their direction and those who do lies in the ability to hold their employees accountable for both safe and unsafe actions. The best supervisors provide positive feedback for safe actions and appropriately confront unsafe actions. *In short, safe supervisors know how to praise safe actions and confront unsafe actions in a way that both motivates and enables employees to perform safely.* These safe supervisors influence their employees to *want* to perform safely. How do they do it? The skills exhibited by safe supervisors are the same skills that have recently been identified in the New York Times best selling book by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Al Switzler and Ron McMillan entitled **“Crucial Confrontations: Tools for resolving broken promises, violated expectations, and bad behavior”**. Their work is based on two decades of research with thousands of individuals, in many different types of industries around the world. What they discovered is that those who are not very effective at dealing with confrontations either avoid the confrontation (giving tacit approval for the bad behavior) or deal with it too forcefully (creating anger, frustration and the desire to get even). The best performers (like safe supervisors) all tend to enter into dialogue with the person they are confronting and use very specific skills to influence them.

## **Here’s What Make the Best the Best: Crucial Confrontations™ (© VitalSmarts™)**

When others break a promise, violate an expectation, or behave badly (e.g. act in an unsafe manner), the best at confrontation:

- **Know When to Speak Up.** Most of us are extremely creative in making excuses for not talking to someone who has broken a promise (performed unsafely for example). Top performers know how to analyze a problem, decide if it’s worthy of a confrontation, and then take the right action. Consequently, they step up to far more violated expectations than their less-skilled colleagues. And when they do step up, they typically succeed – enhancing their confidence and encouraging them to speak up the next time. Safe supervisors know that they must confront every unsafe action because failure to do so provides tacit approval for the behavior and increases the risk of future incidents.
- **Pick the Right Problem.** Most problems come in large bundles. A single infraction may include everything from a procedural violation, to failure to keep a commitment, to insubordination. Which issue do you address? Low performers typically pick the easiest or least controversial problem – allowing the most important one to remain unresolved. Top performers are masters at recognizing the elements tied up in a single infraction, picking the most important issue and then, once and for all, resolving the problem that really matters.
- **Take Charge of Emotions.** When someone lets you down, you often feel disappointed and upset. If you’re not careful, you carry these strong emotions into the confrontation. Top performers cut off their strong reactions at the source. They learn how to be curious rather than angry. They use their curiosity to

propel them into a healthy confrontation rather than a dangerous attempt to punish the guilty. Top performers will address infractions, but they'll never be abusive or out of control when they do.

- **Avoid the Fundamental Attribution Error.** When people break promises, others often assume they had bad intentions. This tendency to automatically believe people behave badly because they take pleasure in causing pain is called “the fundamental attribution error.” Instead of jumping to this conclusion, top performers ask questions like, “Are people capable of doing what you’ve asked them? Are their peers and managers supportive? Do others both encourage and enable? What role do the reward system, policies, and procedures play in either encouraging or enabling the behavior?” By bringing a more humane and sophisticated view to the problem, they’re better prepared to diagnose and then solve problem behavior.
- **Master the “Hazardous Half Minute.”** The first thirty seconds of any confrontation will determine the tone for the entire interaction. Top performers set themselves apart from everyone else with their ability to immediately establish a healthy climate – despite the fact that they’re talking about problems. During this critical half minute, they not only provide a clear and concise problem statement, but they do so in a way that makes it safe for the other person to talk openly and honestly.
- **Avoid “Groundhog Day.”** If you want to separate the best from the rest, watch for this phenomenon. When employees repeat a mistake, do the individuals who are addressing the problem treat each instance as if it were the first one? If they do, they live the life of Phil Connors (in the movie *Groundhog Day*), who was forced to repeat

the same day over and over again until he got it right. Savvy problem solvers avoid useless repetition by treating each infraction with increasing levels of severity and urgency. First, an employee has violated a safety procedure; the next time it happens, he or she has failed to live up to a promise; next he or she is insubordinate; and so on. One of the reasons that many companies are experiencing little or no continuous improvement in incident rates is because their supervisors are living in “groundhog day”.

- **Motivate without Using Power.** Most people believe that if they only had enough power, they could motivate just about anyone to do just about anything. And they’d be right – power can “motivate.” However, using power may ruin relationships and incur other long-term costs (e.g., hiding incidents). Skilled problem solvers rely on persuasion, not fear. Even when they do possess formal power, they rarely use it. They’re gifted at clearly and concisely explaining natural consequences that help others make decisions, so they don’t end up using threats such as, “My way or the highway!” or the ever popular “Aren’t you a team player?”
- **Enable without Taking Over.** When people face ability barriers – making it difficult or even impossible to keep their promise – it’s tempting to rely on motivational techniques to encourage them to comply. However, when the task is impossible, motivation is irrelevant. Top performers are quick to help struggling individuals come up with methods for reducing barriers. They’re skilled at creative problem solving and know the difference between enabling others and allowing them to get away with excuses.
- **Stay on Track.** As crucial confrontations unfold, it’s common for those who caused the problem to sidetrack or even hijack the

discussion. They throw up smoke screens, do their best to deflect blame, and skillfully turn the focus on the more trivial aspects of the infraction – taking the heat off themselves and in some cases, moving the conversation to a whole new topic. Top performers aren't easily sidetracked. They're adept at staying both focused and flexible. They know when and how to stay on the original topic, or if necessary, switch to a new and more urgent issue – without being drawn away from the original problem.

## THE NEXT STEP

So, how do we move incident rates to zero? While safety engineering and awareness programs have gotten us the significant reduction in workplace incidents that we have today, moving to the next level and eliminating incidents will require a change, not just in systems, but in people. We have to focus on eliminating incidents before they occur by eliminating the unsafe actions of people. To accomplish this objective we must ensure that several things happen:

- Identify and control the activators that are signaling both safe and unsafe behavior in the workplace.
- Know the hazards that our employees face for each job they do and make sure that they are aware of them also.
- Control those hazards to minimize or, if possible, eliminate the risk.
- Observe the actions of our employees and the conditions that they face.
- Control the unsafe conditions.
- Hold people accountable for their unsafe actions, utilizing “*crucial confrontations*™” skills.
- Recognize safe performance with positive feedback.

To accomplish this, each organization must evaluate not only its safety systems, but also the confrontational skills of supervisors and non-supervisors alike. Safe organizational cultures are those where individuals feel confident in confronting unsafe actions, not to make others look bad, but to keep them safe because keeping people safe is the right thing to do. Does your organization have a culture in place where everyone feels confident and safe in confronting unsafe actions? Take a look at your safety statistics. If your incident rate is anywhere above zero, then your organization, without any doubt, has people still behaving unsafely and, as we all know, *one single unsafe act can become a fatality*. Are you ready to take the next step to eliminate unsafe actions?

\* **Crucial Confrontations**™ is a registered trademark of VitalSmarts, L.C.

### About the Authors:

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