Key Processes

for Continuous Safety Improvement

Behavior-Based Recognition and Celebration

Most safety professionals intuitively recognize the value of recognition and rewards in improving people's behaviors and attitudes. They understand that consequences motivate behavior and that positive consequences can create positive attitudes and boost morale. Thus, recognition and reward programs have become an integral part of most safety motivation efforts. Unfortunately, many such efforts do not produce optimal results and some actually do more harm than good.

Although intuition suggests that recognition and rewards are beneficial, common sense, alone, is not enough to ensure optimal implementation of such a process. It must be augmented with the results of rigorous behavioral science research. The article, "The Truth About Safety Incentives" (*PS*, Oct. 96), pointed out common mistakes practitioners make when administering incentive and reward programs, and offered research-based guidelines for using incentives more effectively (Geller 34+). This article offers guidelines for gaining greater benefit from interpersonal safety recognition, including group celebrations.

PART OF HUMAN NATURE

William James, an early American psychologist, wrote "the deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated" (Carnegie 19). John Dewey, founder of the field of school psychology, claimed "the deepest urge in human nature is the desire to be important" (Carnegie 18). Building on these theories, Dale Carnegie advocated that the way to

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win friends and influence people is to "always make the other person feel important" (Carnegie 130). How can this human need be fulfilled? By giving and receiving recognition well.

Several pop-psychology publications have examined the do's and don'ts of recognizing individuals and celebrating group success. Not all have been founded on rigorous research, however, and some present inaccurate advice. For example, consider this guideline: "Praise publicly and reprimand privately." Does common sense support such advice? (Perhaps after hearing this slogan repeatedly, people have come to believe it.)

This article explains why this and several other common-sense ideas about recognizing and celebrating are wrong. To derive the guidelines presented here, the author consulted the research literature, as well as books (with a research foundation) on interpersonal recognition and celebra-

tion. (See Allen, Carnegie, Daniels, Latham, Sulzer-Azaroff and Mayer.)

Although these sources are consistent in their advice, some recommendations seem to be inconsistent with many common approaches in safety. Hopefully, this article will help narrow the gap between ideal and actual application of safety recognition and celebration processes and, thus, help readers gain greater impact from their attempts to motivate and sustain desired safety performance.

GIVE MORE QUALITY RECOGNITION

To make people feel good, some claim that people must fail in order to learn. "Don't worry about your errors," they say. "We can't learn unless we make mistakes." To support this assertion, they offer a sports analogy about "the greatest home-run hitter in baseball." "Do you know who struck out more times than any other professional baseball player," they ask. Their answer: Babe Ruth. The implication is that he learned his skill by making errors.

Although this anecdote may make people feel better about making errors, such advice often does more harm than good. Indeed, it could become an excuse for focusing more on failure than on success. Some even believe that people should be pushed until they err—in effect, "forcing" them to learn from the experience.

Nothing could be further from the truth, however. Although Babe Ruth might be the best-known baseball player, he did not hit the most home runs nor did he strike out the most.

As behavioral scientists have shown, success (not failure) produces the most

learning (Chance). For example, in the early 1900s, Edward Lee Thorndike studied intelligence by putting chickens, cats, dogs, fish, monkeys and humans in situations that called for problem-solving behavior. Then, he observed how these organisms learned. As a result, he coined the phrase "law of effect," which refers to the fact that learning depends on the consequences of behavior. When a behavior is followed by a "satisfying state of affairs," the probability of that behavior recurring is increased. If an "annoying state of affairs" follows, however, that behavior (considered an error) is less likely to recur.

What type of consequence, positive or negative, leads to the most learning? Must an error occur in order for someone to solve a problem? Think about a personal experience to answer the first question. A pleasant consequence provides direction and motivates an individual to continue a behavior. That person knows what was done to receive the reward and, thus, is motivated to earn another.

Conversely, a negative consequence that follows a mistake only tells an individual what not to do; it provides no specific direction for solving the problem. Furthermore, overemphasis on a mistake can be frustrating and discouraging—in effect, it de-motivates an individual to continue the learning process.

Errors are not a requisite for learning. In fact, when training results in no errors, learning occurs smoothly and is enjoyable (Terrance). Errors merely disrupt the flow of a teaching/learning process and can foster a negative attitude, especially if negative social consequences accentuate the mistake. (Even subtle reactions can sour a person on the learning process.)

It is also noteworthy that Thorndike referred to the type of learning discovered in his problem-solving research as "trial and accidental success" (Thorndike 174). Many textbooks use the term "trial-and-error learning" to describe Thorndike's research—a term he opposed because of its inaccurate implications.

This inaccuracy is a potential source of the pop-psychology error described earlier. It also tells practitioners they need to read original research and not rely on secondhand interpretation. Now, let's consider the need to support safety success via quality recognition.

HOW TO GIVE QUALITY RECOGNITION

What is the antidote to depressed learning caused by the negative consequences of incorrect behavior? The provision of positive consequences for correct behavior. And what is the most powerful positive consequence readily available to motivate correct behavior and support the learning process? Social recognition. The following seven guidelines can help maximize the positive impact of interpersonal recognition.

Deliver Recognition During or Immediately After Safe Behavior

To provide optimal direction, recognition must be associated directly with the desired behavior. The recipient must know what s/he did to earn the appreciation. Then, that person is motivated to continue that behavior.

If praise must be delayed, the behavior or activities that deserve recognition should be "relived." This involves talking specifically about the performance that warranted special recognition. Asking the recipient to describe the situation and the desirable behavior provides motivation to continue the behavior. Connecting a person's behavior with praise also makes the commendation special and personal.

Make It Personal for Both Parties

Recognition is most meaningful when it is perceived as personal. Praise should not be general appreciation that would fit anyone in any situation. Rather, it should fit the particular recipient. This occurs naturally when recognition is linked to the individual's performance under designated circumstances.

The person giving quality recognition should express personal appreciation. Certainly, it is tempting to say "we appreciate" rather than "I appreciate" and to refer to company gratitude rather than personal acknowledgment. However, speaking for the firm may seem impersonal and insincere.

Although it is appropriate to reflect value to the organization when praising someone, the focus should be personal. For example, "I saw what you did to support our safety process and I really appreciate it. Your example illustrates actively caring and demonstrates the kind of leadership we need to achieve a total safety culture." The second statement illustrates the next guideline.

Connect Specific Behavior With Higher-Level Praise

Recognition is most memorable and best boosts self-esteem when it reflects a higher-order characteristic. Adding a universal attitude such as leadership, integrity, trust-worthiness or actively caring to the praise enhances the recognition. However, the key is to state the specific behavior first, then link that behavior and the positive attribute it reflects.

Deliver It Privately and One-On-One

Because quality recognition is personal and indicative of some higher-order attributes, it should be delivered in private. After all, it is relevant to only one person.

Conventional thinking holds that individuals should be recognized in front of a group. This approach is common in athletic contests and is reflected in the slogan, "Praise publicly, reprimand privately." Managers who follow this advice typically deliver individual recognition in group settings.

However, it is not necessarily rewarding to be held up as an exemplar in front of one's peers. Safety managers need to realize that some employees feel embarrassed when identified in a group setting.

In athletic events, each participant's performance is measured fairly, and the winner is then determined objectively. Although behavior-based safety recognition is also objective, it is usually not possible to assess each person's safety-related behaviors and obtain a fair ranking for individual recognition. Besides, such a process creates a win-lose atmosphere.

Recognizing teams for their accomplishments is beneficial and can be performed in a group setting. Group accomplishment worthy of recognition can be publicly documented. By dispersing individual responsibility across the group, the risk of individual embarrassment or peer harassment is minimized.

However, group achievement is rarely the result of equivalent performance from all team members. Some individuals typically take the lead, while others do less, counting on the group to "make them look good." Behavioral scientists call this phenomenon "social loafing" (Latane, Williams and Harkins 823+). Thus, personal, private recognition should be delivered to those who have gone beyond the call of duty for the sake of the team.

Let It Stand Alone and Soak In

Some people recommend a "sandwich method" to enhance the impact of interpersonal communication. "First say something nice, then give corrective feedback, then say something nice again." Although this approach may seem correct, it is not supported by research.

In fact, such a mixed message can cause confusion and reduce credibility. The impact of the initial recognition is canceled by the subsequent correction, then corrective feedback is neutralized by the closing recognition. Thus, the key is to keep recognition simple and direct, and allow time for the praise to soak in.

In this age of doing more with less, it is tempting to connect unrelated statements to behavior-based praise. Often, this is perceived as "I appreciate what you've done for safety, but I need more."

Additional points should be addressed later, after the praise has been internalized and become part of the recipient's self-recognition system. Quality recognition provides the recipient with a script that s/he can use to reward his/her own behavior. In other words, receiving praise strengthens the recipient's self-reward system—a critical element for long-term maintenance of safe behavior.

Recognition is most meaningful when it is perceived as personal—when it fits the recipient and is linked to specific behavior.

Use Tangibles for Symbolic Value Only

A tangible award can detract from the self-recognition aspect of quality recognition. If the recognition process focuses on some material reward, words of appreciation may lose significance. In turn, the impact on the recipient's self-reinforcement system is reduced.

If delivered as a token of appreciation, however, a tangible reward can add to the quality of the interpersonal recognition and help promote safety. The manner in which a token is delivered determines whether it adds to or subtracts from the long-term benefit of praise.

The tangible must not be viewed as a payoff for the safety-related behavior; instead, it must be presented as symbolic of going beyond the call of duty for safety. Even in a behavior-based safety incentive program, the tangible should not be considered fair compensation for extra effort on behalf of safety (Geller 34+). Such a reward is not enough to compensate the safety effort; it is only a token of gratitude. The real payoff, of course, is injury prevention.

In an incentive program, a person knows in advance what s/he must do to earn a certain tangible reward. That is the incentive. In contrast, recognition is a reward without an incentive. An individual is observed "doing right" and is recognized for that behavior. If a tangible reward is presented in conjunction with verbal praise, it should be delivered with words that reinforce its symbolic value.

Advantages of Secondhand Recognition

Up to this point, the focus has been one-on-one verbal communication—one person commending another for a safety-related behavior. A person's efforts may also be recognized indirectly.

Suppose, for example, an employee overhears a supervisor speaking to another manager about that employee's outstanding safety presentation. How will this secondhand recognition affect the employee? Will s/he believe the praise was genuine?

Sometimes, people suspect that praise delivered directly is less-than-genuine. The recipient might feel, for example, that the praise-giver has some ulterior motive (i.e., expects a favor in return).

Secondhand recognition is not so easily tainted; thus, its genuineness is less suspect. Suppose a supervisor tells an employee that another member of the workgroup commented on how well that

employee led a safety meeting. What impact does such recognition have?

The worker will likely consider the praise genuine because the manager is only reporting what a co-worker said. Since that person reported the success to a manager rather than directly to the employee, s/he must have no ulterior motive. Secondhand recognition can also foster a sense of belongingness. When a worker learns that a co-worker noted his/her behavior, s/he will likely feel a greater sense of closeness to that co-worker.

Thus, "positive gossip" can be beneficial. Discussing achievements in behavior-specific terms begins a cycle of positive communication that can support desired behavior and help workers build an internal script for self-recognition. It also encourages interpersonal communication, which builds self-esteem, empowerment and group cohesion—person states that increase actively caring behaviors and cultivate a total safety culture (Geller 18+; Geller 16+).

LEARN TO RECEIVE RECOGNITION WELL

If followed, these basic guidelines will increase the benefits of interpersonal recognition. However, the main point of this article is that more recognition for safe behavior is needed in every organization (Allen). And it only takes a few seconds to deliver praise. Perhaps realizing the positive impact that can be achieved with relatively little effort will motivate safety managers to offer more quality recognition.

Even more important, however, are the social consequences an individual receives when offering praise. Many people receive so little recognition from others that they are surprised when their actions are acknowledged and some simply do not know how to accept such appreciation. Some might claim that they do not deserve the praise, while others may suspect that the praise-giver is insincere. This can embarrass the person offering the recognition and may dissuade him/her from continuing the practice.

A basic behavioral science principle holds that consequences influence the behaviors they follow (Skinner). This is true for both parties—praise-giver and praise-receiver. Much like quality recognition can increase the probability that recognized behavior will continue, reaction to recognition influences whether praise will be given again. Thus, people must learn to react appropriately. Following are seven basic guidelines.

Avoid Denial and Disclaimer Statements

The most common inappropriate reaction to praise is awkward denial. A person may ignore the praise or offer a disclaimer: "It really was nothing special." "Just doing my job." "I couldn't have done it without your support."

Recognition should be accepted without denial and without deflecting credit to others. It is okay to show pride in personal, "small-win" accomplishments, even if others contributed to the outcome (Weick 40+). In a total safety culture, everyone must go beyond the call of duty for safety. In such an environment, many people deserve recognition daily; it becomes "employee of the moment" rather than "employee of the month."

Listen Attentively With Genuine Appreciation

To accept recognition, first listen actively to the person giving it—learn what was done right. This also allows the recipient to evaluate whether the praise is well-delivered. If a particular behavior is not identified, ask for that information. This helps improve the praiser's method. Try not to seem critical, however; instead, show genuine appreciation for the attention.

Take It In, Relive It for Self-Motivation

As noted, most safety-related behaviors go unnoticed—many are performed when no one else is observing. So, when recognition is finally forthcoming, accept it as well-deserved. Listening intently to every word of praise not only shows caring but also indicates a desire to remember the special occasion.

Show Sincere Appreciation

After listening actively, with humble acceptance, show sincere appreciation, offer a "thank you" and perhaps say something such as "you've made my day." As noted, a person's reaction to being recognized can actually influence whether similar recognition will recur.

Recognize the Person for Recognizing You

Accepting recognition with heartfelt responsiveness rewards the recognizer for his/her extra effort and motivates that individual to continue the practice. The recognizer can be commended as well. The recipient might say that s/he appreciates the pinpointing of a particular behavior. Such feedback facilitates those aspects of the recognition process that must become habitual.

Embrace the Reciprocity Principle

Some people resist receiving recognition because they do not want to feel obligated to recognize others. This is the reciprocity norm at work (Geller, "The Social Dynamic"). To achieve a total safety culture, this norm must be embraced. Research has proven that when one individual is nice to

another, it is more likely that that person will respond in kind (Schroeder, et al). Although the original praiser may not receive the returned favor, someone will (Berkowitz and Daniels 429+).

Genuine acceptance of quality recognition activates the reciprocity norm. The more this norm is activated, the greater the frequency of interpersonal recognition and active caring. The result will be more interpersonal involvement consistent with the vision of a total safety culture.

Ask For Recognition When It's Deserved But Not Forthcoming

One final strategy can help increase safety recognition throughout a culture. If an employee feels that recognition is deserved, why not ask for it? Although the resulting praise may seem less genuine, the outcome can be positive.

For example, consider the potential impact of this statement: "I am pleased with the result of my extra effort, including my performance of particular behaviors." With the right tone and intonation, such a proclamation will be perceived as a declaration of personal pride in a small-win accomplishment. The listener will likely support this personal praise with individual testimony, which will bolster later self-recognition.

Years ago, I instituted a self-recognition process among research students; it was designed to increase awareness of the value of receiving praise, even when self-initiated. I told each student that, during class meetings, s/he could request a standing ovation at any time. The student simply had to state what behavior s/he felt deserved the recognition, then ask for a standing ovation.

Such recognition is not private or personal, so it is not optimal. The public aspects of the process inhibit many requests for a standing ovation. However, several students have asked, and the experience is always positive. Each request has included a solid rationale, and the actual ovation is fun for all. Furthermore, all parties learn about the motivating process of behavior-based recognition, even when it does not follow all quality principles.

QUALITY SAFETY CELEBRATIONS ARE ESSENTIAL

The current "lean and mean" business environment has reduced morale in many organizations. This often leads to apathy with regard to safety, as well as a decreased willingness to look out for the safety and health of others. In other words, lower employee morale means fewer people are actively caring for safety. How can this situation be reversed?

Giving and receiving recognition are prime ways to boost morale. Likewise, properly executed celebrations can boost morale, motivate teamwork and promote a sense of belongingness. The key is to

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carry out celebrations correctly. The following discussion offers guidelines for celebrating safety accomplishments.

Don't Announce Celebrations of Injury Reduction

Most safety celebrations occur when the number of injuries is reduced to a specified level. For example, a firm may host a celebration dinner after a specific number of weeks or months pass with no recordable injury. Although achieving a record number of injury-free workdays is worth celebrating, the firm must be sure the record was achieved fairly. If people cheat to win by not reporting injuries, for example, the celebration will be meaningless.

The temptation to cheat is increased when a celebration for lower injuries is announced as an incentive. In other words, when employees are promised a reward if they work a certain duration without injury, they may be tempted to hide a personal injury. Under these circumstances, some employees may feel pressure from peers to avoid reporting any. Such an environment reduces trust and fosters the belief that improved levels of safety cannot be achieved fairly.

If the accomplishment of process activities is celebrated, it is fine to establish a behavior-consequence contingency. That is, expected behaviors can be identified in order to warrant a celebration. Such goal-setting motivates teamwork.

For example, a group may decide to celebrate after conducting a designated number of safety audits, investigating a given number of near-miss reports, completing a training series or performing a certain number of one-on-one safety coaching sessions. In such cases, an achievable goal is set and progress monitored. When the goal is reached, a celebration is clearly warranted.

Focus on the Journey

Many safety celebrations place little attention on the journey or processes that enabled the recognized milestone. Typically, the focus is on the end result (i.e., zero injuries for a certain period of time), with little discussion about how the outcome was achieved. Although it is natural to "toast" the bottom line, more can be gained from recognizing the process.

Pinpointing aspects of the journey that were instrumental in reaching a safety milestone gives valuable direction and motivation. Participants learn what they

must do in order to continue a successful process. Those responsible for the behaviors identified receive a boost in self-effectiveness, personal control and optimism.

Perhaps the primary reason for acknowledging these activities, however, is that it gives credit where credit is due. Highlighting the process endorses the people and actions that made the difference, which leads to the next guideline.

Show Top-Down Support But Facilitate Bottom-Up Involvement

A safety celebration often opens with speeches from executives who express their extreme pleasure in the accomplishment. Charts that reflect the improvement and the amount of money saved may be displayed. Often, these executives issue sincere requests for continuous improvement. "If injury rates continue to decrease," they say, "we'll have a bigger party." Individuals or team captains may receive plaques. Perhaps all participants receive a certificate and a token with a safety slogan. Rarely, however, are the safety processes discussed.

Thus, in a typical safety celebration, management gives and operators receive. Although this demonstrates impressive top-down support, the ceremony would be more memorable and a better learning and motivational experience if management did more listening than speaking and employees did more talking about their experiences in the journey.

Facilitate Discussion to Relive the Journey

Management's primary role in a safety celebration should be to facilitate discussion about activities that precipitated the accomplishment. By reliving the procedures that made the journey successful, people strengthen their internal self-recognition scripts. When managers listen to such discussions with genuine interest, they reward the participation that enabled the success and empower employees to continue the journey.

One successful safety celebration featured a series of brief presentations by teams of hourly workers. These employees shared safety ideas that they had implemented to prevent work-related injuries. Some workers demonstrated new personal protective equipment; some displayed graphs of data obtained from behavioral audits; some discussed their procedures for encouraging near-miss incident reports and implementing correc-

tive action; others presented ergonomic analysis and redesign of a workstation.

Even the entertainment was employee-driven. The employees performed a safety-related skit and conducted a talent show (with entrants from all levels of the organization). Music was provided by an employee band. This day-long celebration was planned and presented by the people whose daily involvement in safety processes enabled the dramatic achievement that was celebrated.

Enable Discussions of Successes and Failures

When work teams discussed safety projects during this celebration, they related both successes and failures. They not only displayed positive results, they also relived their disappointments and frustrations. This approach made the presentations realistic and reflected the amount of dedicated work needed to complete projects and reduce workplace injuries.

Presentations that identify the hardships encountered during the journey to success justify the celebration. They demonstrate that the improvement was not the result of luck but rather the result of hard work of many people going beyond the call of duty to make small-win contributions via interdependence and synergy.

Use Tangible Rewards to Establish a Memory

When people discuss the difficulties faced in reaching an objective, goal attainment is more memorable. When managers demonstrate sincere interest and appreciation, the event becomes even more significant.

Distributing a tangible reward during such an occasion reinforces the memory and promotes its value. Tangibles can include words (a worker-designed safety slogan) signifying the occasion. Ideally, the tangible should be an item that can be readily displayed or used (i.e., mugs, placards, caps, shirts and umbrellas).

When such rewards are delivered, be sure to note that they "serve to remind us how we achieved our real reward—fewer people getting hurt." One week after the celebration described here, each participant received a framed photograph of everyone who attended the event.

Solicit Employee Input

Everyone has a personal way of celebrating. During a group celebration, personal prejudices are often inadvertently imposed on others. Participants are rarely asked to help plan the celebration.

When asking people how they wish to celebrate, challenge them to think beyond tangible rewards. A discussion about material rewards puts the celebration in a payoff-for-behavior mode, which is not its intended purpose.

The manner in which a safety milestone is celebrated determines whether the event is perceived as meaningful and memorable, or as just another misguided (although well-intentioned) attempt to show management approval. Thus, to motivate teamwork, a safety celebration requires bottom-up involvement as well as top-down support.

CONCLUSION

Group celebrations and interpersonal recognition go hand-in-hand in cultivating a culture of actively caring people who work interdependently to keep each other injury-free. Group celebrations foster the spirit of belongingness needed in a total safety culture. However, such celebrations do not provide sufficient recognition for those special individuals who "made it happen." As noted, in any group project, some individuals champion the effort, while others "go with the flow."

Since some participants deserve more credit than others, group recognition should be followed by one-on-one recognition. Recognizing these champions shows that management realizes the importance of individual leadership in team accomplishment. This process adds to the internal motivational script that each person has begun to develop (thanks to the group celebration) and increases the likelihood of continued leadership.

This article has presented basic guidelines for increasing the quality of interpersonal recognition, as well as ways to receive recognition. A person must learn to receive recognition well—to listen intently to every word of praise with positive regard. The commendation must not be denied nor should credit be deflected to others.

Complimenting the praise-giver for taking the time to offer quality recognition increases the likelihood that s/he will give similar recognition in the future. Thanks to the reciprocity norm, quality reception of quality recognition will likely cause the praise-giver to commend others for their safety-related behavior more often. Is there a better way to keep people involved in achieving the many small wins needed to prevent work-related injuries? I don't think so. ■

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