

# Multiplication

**Tim Marsh** argues that in creating a sustainable safety culture, two out of three is bad

WHEN it comes to psychological theories of what motivates people, the one most people have come across is Abraham Maslow's concept of the "hierarchy of needs". Maslow ranked human needs, starting with the basics such as food and sleep, moving through security and self-esteem and ending at the top with self-actualisation, or the desire for personal growth and fulfilment.

In safety management, this hierarchy is often used to suggest that if you plan an initiative appealing to workers' desire for personal safety — which is one of the basics near the bottom of the hierarchy — it can go wrong if you don't also take into account some of the higher ones, such as the wish for a sense of belonging in their work group or for their colleagues' respect.

Maslow's focus on the person remains as good an explanation as any as to why workforce "ownership" is such a powerful element of any attempt to improve safety culture.

But there's another, less well-known motivation model that may be more central to why so many safety culture programmes fail. It suggests that success or failure is not so much about the individual's motivation at all, as about the *organisation* they work for and the environment they find themselves in.

## Vroom's model

Victor Vroom is a professor at the Yale School of Management in the US. His expectancy theory of motivation says that an individual's motivation to do something will be a multiplication of the following three factors:

- whether they know what they are required to do and why
- whether they feel they have the skills to do it effectively
- whether they value the outcome.

Just to repeat, the critical thing is that this sum is not an *addition* it's a multiplication, so a nil score *anywhere* brings the whole score to nil. The model gives a clue to why so many apparently excellent looking safety

programmes achieve little. Let's look at the three components.

## Clear instruction

Do your employees know what the organisation wants of them? This hinges on the quality of your leadership, strategy and vision and how clearly you define responsibilities. It's widely agreed that the best safety cultures are ones that are driven by line management, not the safety department. This means making sure the management and supervisors know exactly what's expected of them. Some companies are still struggling with this basic building block, and from the Vroom perspective, they're obviously going nowhere fast and can't score well.

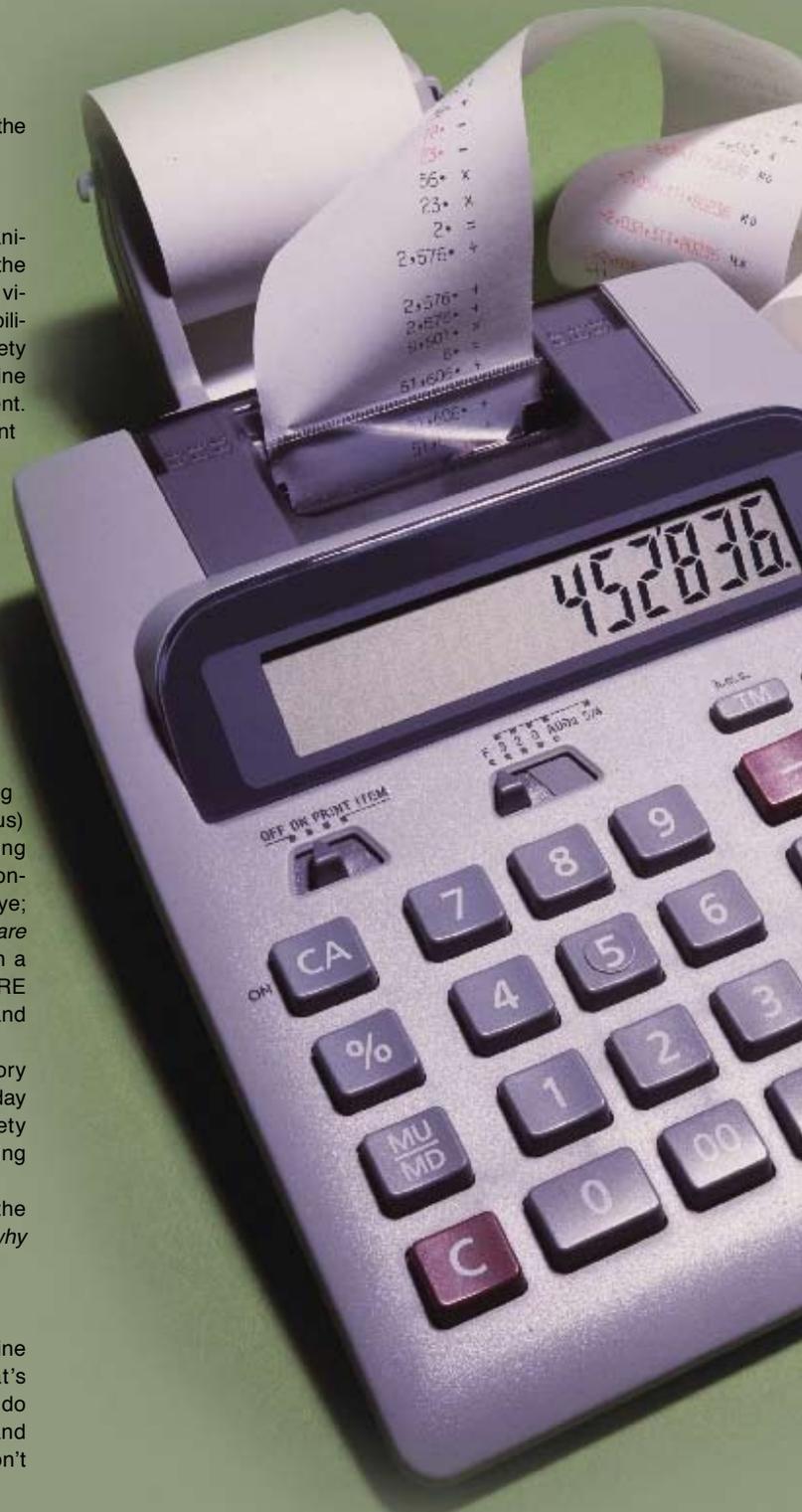
While the importance of strategy and senior management leadership can't be overstated, the real core of a safety culture lies in the day-to-day behaviour and habits of front-line management and supervision. Good practice includes always leading by example, rather than the (disastrous) *usually* leading by example; challenging small but important unsafe acts and conditions, rather than turning a blind eye; taking the time to dig with curious "why are you doing that?" questions rather than a blame-laden and exasperated "why ARE you doing that?"; and the use of praise and constructive coaching techniques.

It's vital that everyone with supervisory responsibilities understands the day-to-day behaviour required for an active safety culture and that they are not just telling subordinates to "be safe".

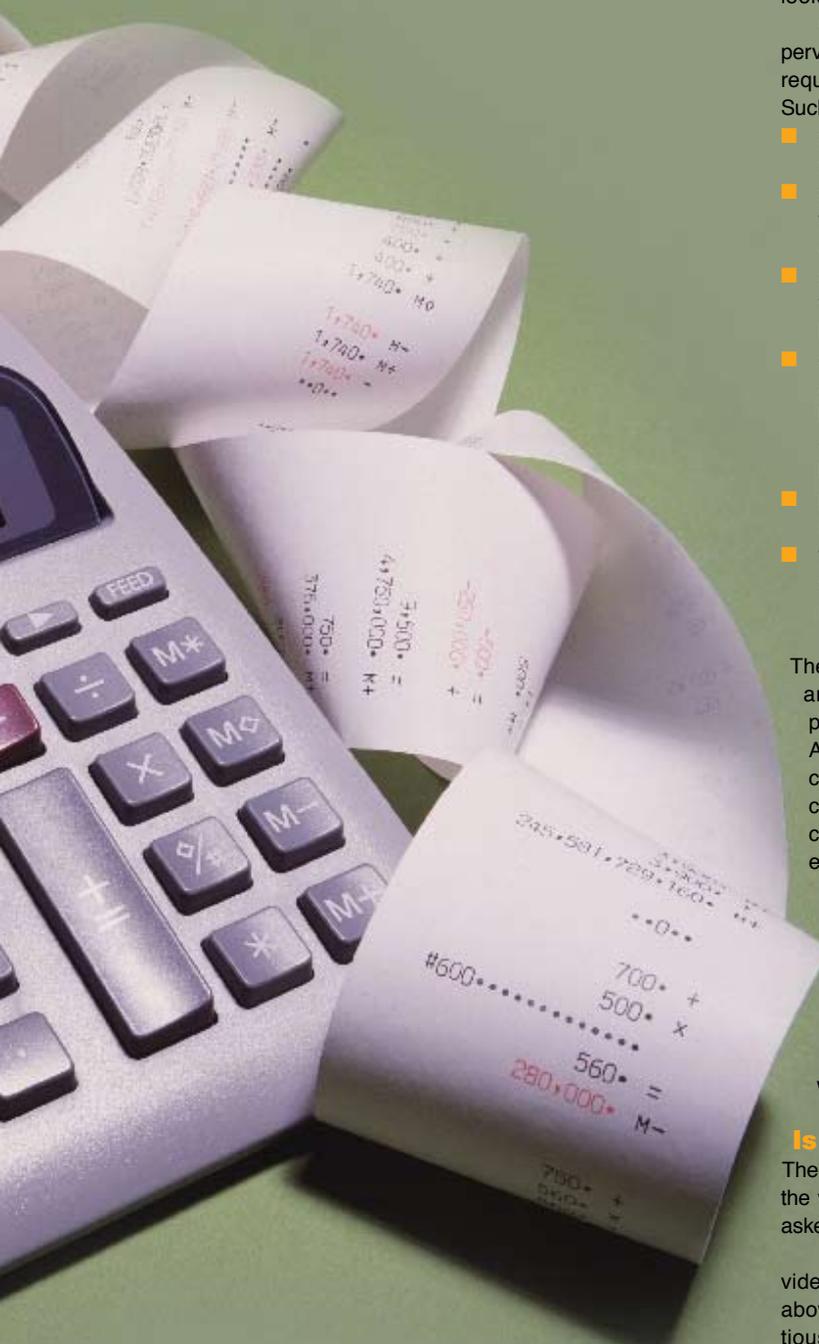
Of course this works best when the company also takes the time to explain *why* these behaviours are so important.

## Up to the job

If you've covered stage one, your front-line managers should know exactly what's required of them. The next question is do they have the confidence to go out and actually do it, or are they worried they don't



# game



have the skills and will make themselves look foolish if they try?

Obviously, the worst companies give supervisors no training at all in the sort of skills required in a culture change programme. Such skills include:

- giving formal verbal presentations in a structured, impactful and concise way
- giving negative feedback without making the person on the receiving end defensive and stropy
- giving positive feedback and praise without generating embarrassment on both sides
- confronting difficulties using basic assertiveness techniques rather than backing down to avoid a confrontation or getting stuck into the confrontation but losing their temper
- proper analysis of basic human factors issues
- facilitating effective group problem solving with maximum delegation and maximising coaching opportunities.

The more advanced skills of persuasion and decision making were set out in previous HSW articles in February and April 2009 ([www.healthandsafetyatwork.com/content/risk-perception-reality-check](http://www.healthandsafetyatwork.com/content/risk-perception-reality-check) and [www.healthandsafetyatwork.com/content/how-win-friendsinfluencing-employees](http://www.healthandsafetyatwork.com/content/how-win-friendsinfluencing-employees)).

If the organisation has any ambitions about having a sound safety culture, you need training in these techniques for front-line supervision. Because those who don't feel they can challenge, analyse, praise and coach reasonably well probably won't even try.

### Is it worth it?

The last factor in Vroom's formula is about the value that people put on what they are asked to do.

Let's say your organisation has provided sound training in the skills described above and can say it has a clear and ambitious vision and strategy, communicated to employees and has defined responsibilities and specific roles clearly to the line managers.

That's great, but this is where it most frequently goes belly up. Vroom's model says clearly that even getting all the above right will achieve little if you don't secure the final element. As we've said, this is because the total is a multiplication not an addition, and the above work only gets you, in cricket terms, to the crease. It's a classic "necessary but not sufficient", since a zero score for any factor gives you a zero overall.

Some people will naturally value the outcome because of personal values or an upsetting past experience perhaps, but the vast majority need to be *taught* to value the outcome. We achieve this through systematically following up and checking their behaviour both formally and informally through everything from formal appraisals and daily cues and reinforcements. This all helps reinforce to them how important the safety culture is to the organisation.

Again, it's a simple equation. Even if they know what to do and have the skills to do it, many simply won't bother if they haven't been painstakingly taught to value the outcome. As important as culture surveys and training are, they are nowhere near as important in the medium to long term as in-house follow-up.

This third element of the equation is so vital because the average company's follow-up is poor and the few that are good are more than matched by those that are actually very poor.

A hugely experienced safety manager I work with says "in my experience most good companies talk the talk really well but in some, going off and getting the safety right as requested is noticed and is known in the smoke shack to be career enhancing – in others it just *isn't* ... and, frankly, where it isn't, you're going nowhere fast!".

I'd like to suggest that if a company doesn't follow up properly and engrain the safety culture message after propagating it, then they'd be better off not investing resources in enhancement programmes at all. Vroom's simple equation explains why this is true in a language that even the most time-pressed board member can understand. ■

■ Dr Tim Marsh is a consultant and trainer specialising in behavioural safety, [www.rydermarsh.co.uk](http://www.rydermarsh.co.uk)