

How to win

Tim Marsh offers some simple influencing techniques to help ensure people

PETE GOSS is a singlehanded round-the-world yachtsman, most famous for giving up any chance of winning a race and risking his life to turn back into the face of a severe Antarctic storm to save a French sailor who was in trouble.

At a recent safety seminar, he was asked, "How long did it take to decide to turn back?" His answer was: "About 15 to 20 seconds. It wasn't exactly convenient," he explained, "but it's what you do. It's a value of the sea that is deeply embedded. It doesn't actually need thinking about."

The challenge thrown back to the audience of senior managers was this: are our oft-stated values, such as "if it can't be done safely — then don't do it", as deeply embedded? From the uneasy silence that filled the room, I got the impression not everyone was comfortable with their own answers.

Recent psychological research shows just how easily we can communicate any lack of conviction to the workforce and, on a more positive side, how we can best communicate it if we are committed. You often hear the statement: "We're doing everything the culture change experts told us we should be doing ... it just doesn't seem to be working."

I'd argue that the answer lies in the fact that, as the jazz standard goes, "it aint what you do, it's the way that you do it".

The hierarchy of safety management says that first we need to get the engineering right, making sure the job is done safely, then we need to set up safe systems of work. As BP's Texas City refinery explosion showed, focusing on behavioural issues while forgetting the basics can be disastrous. But once we have established the right systems, next we need to focus on people.

Our first aim should be not to demotivate people, and the key to that is treating them as adults. This means talking *to* them, for example, not *down to* them, and never personalising or generalising when criticising, but describing behaviour and its consequences objectively.

But what if you've done all the engineering and systems work and always treat your workforce like grown-ups. Are there any other things you should make a habit of doing if you want them to listen to your safety messages? The influential researcher and author Robert Cialdini and his colleagues say there are, and some of them are listed below.

Praise be

You may well know the theory about praise being 10 times as effective as criticism, but how do you get praise into a conversation without coming over as an insincere creep and embarrassing yourself?

Motivational interviewing is a clever technique that has its origins in work with delinquent youths, of all things. It's a good way of getting some praise into the conversation naturally and developing rapport. The technique is to ask the person to rate their safety skills and performance on a scale of one to 10. You'll usually get the answer, "about seven, I guess". Now, while we want them to be a nine and the files say they should be a 10, the key here is not to ask, "Why aren't you a 10?" but "Why not a zero?" Then listen to the explanation. This will allow you to murmur, nod and generally be positive and you'll find praising comes quite naturally. It helps you develop a good rapport and usually ensures that their defences drop a bit.

The next question should be "What would you need to do to consider yourself a 10?" and the following discussion should involve some analysis and action planning

friends...

listen to your safety messages

to help them improve. The key question is, “Why aren’t you a zero?”

Another way to build confidence is to admit that you don’t always get things right yourself. Studies show that people trust people who admit they don’t know it all, and that the moment when you are most persuasive is just after you’ve admitted you don’t know it all — and they’ve decided you might be someone they can trust. So during a one-to-one conversation, it’s worth asking about something even if you already know the answer. Most people already know asking questions works well as a basic ice-breaker — but it seems it can change someone’s perception of you too. So it’s worth doing it even if you don’t need to when you want to build trust.

This is personal

There’s a safety campaign in Australia that has the slogan: “If you drink and drive you’re a bloody idiot!” Most people know instinctively this is likely to be effective and I’ll try and explain why. First, imagine you’re booking a table at a nice restaurant. Consider these two typical conversations.

Diner: “A table for two on Saturday at 8pm please.”

Restaurant: “That’s all booked for you. Please ring if you can’t make it.”

Diner: “OK.”

Let’s replay that with slightly different wording:

Diner: “A table for two on Saturday at 8pm please.”

Restaurant: “That’s all booked for you. Can I ask you, will you please ring and let us know if you can’t make it?”

Diner: “Yes, OK, I will.”

You may be surprised to know people are 66% less likely to fail to show up without ringing when asked the second way. It’s because of the “will you” and “yes I will” in the conversation. Though similar words are used, it’s much more personal.

So what we’re suggesting is that whatever you’re asking for in safety, look people in the eye, mean what you say and ask, “Will you...?” Then make sure they look you in the eye back and give a personal commitment to act.

A famous Fleet Street editor who is well known for being a bit on the “manipulative” side once called a reporter who was in

Baghdad when the second Gulf War started and who was a bit worried about his safety. “If you want to come home just do it,” the editor said. “Safety first of course, but you’re doing some fantastic journalism in there.” The reporter stayed.

This is an excellent example of the principle that you never ever put anything important before a “but” in a sentence — as essentially the “but” signals “forget what I just said and focus on this next thing coming up”. So this means (counter-intuitively, for those who believe safety should come first) the message should be “productivity

Influencing basics

- A little praise goes a long way
- Asking questions and admitting you don’t know it all actually makes you more influential
- Make interactions personal — get people to look at you and commit themselves to an action
- Never say anything important before a “but” in a sentence
- Always try and give someone an “out” by giving them new information, so they don’t get defensive
- Being nice obliges people to respond positively

but safety”, not “safety but productivity”. Consider these two communications about a safety action plan:

“So I can’t stress enough how vital it is that we get this list closed out by the end of the month but, that said, I do appreciate it’s going to be difficult” *and*

“I do appreciate it’s going to be difficult but, that said, I can’t stress enough how vital it is that we get this list closed out by the end of the month.”

Though they use exactly the same words, the second version is far more powerful. This is a classic example of how we “leak” what we really feel.

A variation on this is useful when you give someone feedback starting with the good news but with an obvious “but” coming up. They’ll just be focused on what’s coming so it’s better to give a summary of what’s coming, good and bad, before focusing on specifics.

Face saving

If you back people into a corner (and being told we are wrong almost inevitably does) they just get defensive and won’t hear your message; so always give them a face-saving way out if you can. Giving them some new information they probably didn’t know is a good face-saver. Consider this example of a safety manager trying to get a worker to hold the handrail, who instead of the usual “Andy! Handrail!” tries the following:

Manager: “Can I ask you to hold the handrail?”

Andy: “Yeah, all right.”

Manager: “I know it sounds a little thing but I’ve just seen some figures showing that slips, trips and falls made up 40% of all accidents at our sites last year ... and that cost us about half a million or so.”

Andy: “Half a million quid! From slips trips and falls?”

Manager: “I was the same when I first heard ... amazing isn’t it?”

With some explanation, the person is now far more likely to be open to your request.

Finally, and especially if you don’t really have much authority, another way of not backing people into a defensive corner is simply to ask them nicely to do whatever it is

you’d like. Another hugely influential principle of society is that of reciprocity and fairness, with most of us just hating to feel in someone’s debt. Charities have picked up on this and send out free pens with begging letters in the hope you’ll feel obliged to respond.

After a pleasant exchange people are, of course, more likely to mean any promise to change their behaviour in the future. Again studies show that the more a person means a promise they make at the time, the more likely they are to stick to it later on when no one’s around. You can see how that might apply to a chat about the need to wear PPE.

Obviously, if you have enough authority you can skip all this psychology stuff and just insist forcefully people do what you want them to do. Then you simply have to monitor them 24 hours a day, seven days a week, indefinitely. As we said above, if you treat people as adults they’ll probably act in an adult way. Everyone knows exceptions to this rule, but they’re in a minority. It would be sad to pass over useful advice just because it wouldn’t work on the odd halfwit.

Dr Tim Marsh is a consultant, trainer and speaker specialising in behavioural safety techniques, www.rydermarsh.co.uk

Further reading

- Yes! 50 Secrets from the Science of Persuasion, NJ Goldstein, SJ Martin, RB Cialdini, Profile Books
- Affective Safety Management, Tim Marsh, IIRSM
- Drop the Pink Elephant, B.McFarlan, Capstone

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