

10 Ways to Motivate Safe Behaviours

By Sheri Suckling, BSc, NLP Master Practitioner

Virtually every employer and every Occupational Health and Safety practitioner will agree that they would like to have employees more engaged and more motivated to make safe choices, use safe behaviours on the job, and participate willingly in workplace health and safety activities. At the same time, most struggle to achieve this. When fear of non-compliance takes hold, many employers and safety professionals find themselves resorting to whatever means they can find to push people into compliance, yet this is likely to further erode employee commitment and participation.

As Einstein once said, “A definition of insanity is to keep doing the same thing and expect a different result.” If we really want to have people motivated about health and safety issues, we need to re-think the problem.

Motivation – that is, true motivation – only comes from inside the individual, when they make a decision to commit. Any attempt to motivate by pushing, pulling, threatening, or any other external factor, will by nature have limited effect and last only as long as the external force is present and meaningfully applied. Not only does that approach take a lot of effort; it also creates vulnerability when the external force is not present. And who among us can be present and in control of another human being all the time??

To create an engaged, motivated work force takes time and effort, as well as a much different approach. In fact, it takes a much different organisation. Here are some suggestions for what it takes to create that kind of an organisation.

Intention

Does your organisation have a clear and inspiring **vision**? Many organisations have adopted a vision for health and safety that goes something like this: “Zero Harm”. While it’s a noble and worthy goal in many ways, is it enough to inspire and motivate safe behaviours? I would suggest not.

For a vision to be of any value in aligning and motivating the troops, it needs to engage their hearts and minds. Have you ever asked employees what they would like their workplace to be like and what is important to them about workplace safety?

Values are those beliefs and ways of being that are important to us. Shared values align and inspire as long as we understand and share the meaning. We also need to identify and measure the behaviours that demonstrate those values so we know how well we are actually living our values. There’s no point in setting organizational values according to what you think you should be doing; if demonstrated behaviours don’t match the values claimed by the company, frustration and lack of trust will undermine activities and stifle individual motivation. The process of identifying company values and making commitments to live them may require some soul-searching to identify the standards by which we are really prepared to operate.

Strategic plans require sound foundations of an organizational identity, based on an inspiring vision and clearly identified values. Strategic plans support the vision by setting out in broad terms the big picture pathway of how to achieve the vision. Once longer term strategies are established, short-term tactics can be formulated. Too many organisations start with tactics and try to build up the bigger picture, resulting in confusion, chaos and frustration as well as unreliable outcomes.

A clear, inspiring and inclusive vision, framed by shared values and supported by appropriate strategic planning provides certainty as well as key foundations for employees to confidently participate, take responsibility and make decisions.

Structure

Do employees know exactly what is expected of them? Or, perhaps more to the point; is their idea of what you expect the same as yours? **Clear expectations** of individuals in their role (job) provide a safe level of certainty about your expectations for their individual performance. Tools such as **job specifications, role competency profiles and role development guidelines** require managers to plan and organize in advance so employees know where they stand. This also provides managers with meaningful tools to hold employees accountable.

This seems like a very positive situation for all concerned, yet few companies do it very well. Why? With the vast majority of NZ companies SMEs, most have no designated HR function with someone who focuses on organizational matters and employee needs – this generally only happens when the business reaches that painfully awkward size of around 50 employees; at this point, a company is typically ‘too small to be big, yet too big to be small anymore’; many dither about establishing an HR function to address this...until the pain becomes too great to ignore any longer! It’s such an important part of making an organisation run smoothly, and it doesn’t necessarily require installation of a full-on HR department; many options are available for resourcing this.

Management systems provide a clear framework and certainty about how processes should be carried out. If management systems are designed and built around a particular standard, they often result in confusion as well as lack of ownership. Compliance to an external standard should never be the main driver of management systems structure; the standards are generic to allow them to be applied according to the intentions of each clause rather than structure. Why set up a system that follows a standard just so it’s easy for the auditor? The auditor doesn’t live and work at your organisation - but you do! Make sure the system works for your organisations processes and needs first, then check for compliance and address any gaps. This will ensure a logical flow that makes sense to employees, addresses the needs of the business and its customers first, leading to a structure that mirrors and supports business operations.

Appropriate **standards** such as AS/NZS4801 and ACC’s Partnership Programme and Workplace Safety Management Practices standards provide guidance on what specific systems need to be in place.

Capability

What is your organisation's approach to developing employee capability? Are learning and development opportunities used as privileges for favoured employees, as corrective actions in response to an incident, only as much as needed to meet regulatory requirements? Or have you developed a **learning culture** that includes learning and development in everyday work activities all the time?

Learning and development encompasses many things; it includes effective training programmes involving much more than simply giving people information. Teach people how to think, understand, make decisions, and provide opportunities to practice and apply what they have learned. A workplace with a learning culture also uses incidents and mistakes as learning opportunities for growth rather than pointing fingers and finding someone to blame.

Progression pathways allow employees and managers alike to understand realistic timeframes and competency targets for employees, as well as assisting employees to see what is required to achieve advancement beyond their current role.

On –the-job **coaching** has become commonplace in industries such as call centre operations because of the importance of customer service and challenges of retaining trained employees. Skilled coaching provides feedback and supports employees to identify strengths and weaknesses so they can improve. Interestingly, coaching also provides the kind of personal attention that allows an employee to feel cared for.

Many wise employers also provide the means for employees to take responsibility for their own learning and reward those who take the initiative for self-improvement by providing facilities for **self-directed and self-paced learning**. These employers often provide such facilities as on-line or intranet-based learning resources and well-stocked on-site library facilities.

Involvement

One of the biggest mistakes well-meaning health and safety professionals often make is to do everything themselves without **asking employees for input**. While their intention clearly comes from the desire to be helpful and supportive, this tendency overlooks a great deal of practical workplace expertise – after all, who better to understand a task than the person who carries it out on a daily basis?

Attempting to control all activities without meaningful input from the workforce also teaches everyone – managers and workers alike – to consider health and safety the exclusive responsibility of the health and safety coordinator/manager, who has thus taught everyone that they are the expert on such matters and far more qualified to deal with these issues. That's a very difficult and dangerous position to recover from.

It's far more useful to **involve employees** in as many ways as possible in every aspect of their work activities and matters that affect them. In fact, leadership studies have found that employees rank involvement very high on the list of what is important to them about their workplace. Perhaps people really have wanted to be involved and engaged all along and our

well-meant imposition of decisions made in isolation and rules people didn't understand just taught them to step back and disengage. Well, if we have created the problem surely we can fix it!

Develop employee and manager **decision-making skills** through coaching and communication. If you clarify your line of reasoning and share your thinking with employees, this allows them to learn your decision criteria and decision-making strategies so you can more effectively delegate when it is appropriate to do so.

Enable employees to act by developing their knowledge, skills and experience and learn how to delegate effectively. This does not mean simply dumping tasks on unwitting employees; there is a fine line between enabling and abandoning!

Sometimes a task is yours alone to do; in this case, it would not be appropriate to delegate. In other cases, you might allow an individual to act fairly autonomously if they have the knowledge, skills and experience to do so and expectations are clearly outlined. In between these, it may be appropriate to delegate with the requirement to check in at agreed intervals.

Integration

Many companies are accredited to a number of national and international standards, which often creates the impression that the business must maintain several parallel and nearly identical systems. It's even trickier when the various compliance functions are managed by different people; it's not uncommon to find incompatibilities and gaps.

For management systems to provide the benefits they were designed to deliver, **minimise bureaucracy, maximise efficiency** and make it **easy!** The best way to achieve this is to identify the common elements amongst all the standards and set up all compliance processes to work from one common system. It's also getting easier and easier to find auditors who will audit to multiple integrated standards within the same audit, a much better deal financially as well as saving wear and tear on the psyches of those being audited!

Measurement

How do you determine how well you are doing at managing safety? As with any business matter, measurement provides tools for understanding what we are doing well and what needs improvement. But what are we measuring? Businesses typically focus on traditional indicators such as LTIs and LTIFR, yet this is only a small and somewhat flawed part of the bigger picture.

LTIs and other injury statistics are lag indicators – i.e., they measure what has already happened. LTIs and injuries are in the past and can't be changed once an incident has happened. These measures are also notoriously prone to distortion when financial incentives are attached; people may be disinclined to report an incident that will put a dent in their bonus payout, and sometimes people even go to great lengths to stretch the definitions so they don't have to count a serious injury as an LTI. Do these actions make anyone safer?

For measurement to provide meaningful indications of our safety performance, we need to **focus on prevention activities** – i.e., all those activities the organisation undertakes to prevent injuries from happening in the first place. It takes a slight change of perspective, but most organisations can point to a number of undertakings that avoid injuries and incidents, including housekeeping inspections,

Develop **KPIs** that focus on desired safe behaviours and proactive actions and activities that support injury prevention and develop safer workplaces.

Set **performance targets** to focus and stretch you; this is what makes them inspiring. KPIs are only meaningful if they have a target level to achieve. Set these targets high enough to stretch and inspire without setting anyone up for failure.

Measure performance and hold everyone **accountable**. Set suitable KPIs for individuals, work teams and the overall organisation so both individual and team contribution can be recognised and reinforced. Agree on targets and stretch targets, then follow through. Track achievements through regular reporting, and make sure reviews appropriately acknowledge and address both shortcomings and achievements.

Communication

For any organisation to operate at its best, particularly once its size surpasses the magical figure of 50 employees, an **effective communication strategy** is vital. Communication needs to consider who needs to know, what they need to know, when they need to know it, and what actions are required of the recipient. To do this effectively, the organisation must both plan well and identify the specific communication skills required.

When communicating throughout the organisation, it's important to take into account the needs of the targeted audience for any give communication and ensure the message is delivered appropriately. Although many managers rely on emails and notice boards to get messages out to the organisation, this medium is passive and prone to inconsistent interpretations. Where possible, **interactive communication** such as meetings or team briefings provide the means to communicate and check that messages have been correctly received and interpreted.

Always **follow through** on commitments with appropriate action, and always **follow up** to ensure actions are carried out and effective.

Enjoyment

While safety is an important matter, it doesn't have to be treated in a serious and somber manner. In fact, it can be just that seriousness that gets in the way of engaging people.

Adding an element of **creativity** to safety activities can bring freshness and life to otherwise dry issues. **Variety** and finding ways to make it **fun** can go a long way toward involving employees and managers. It's actually easy to do if you take a look at what people already do for fun and enjoyment; just apply the same principles to health and safety matters. Games, competitions, themes etc can easily breathe new life and more energy into health and safety initiatives.

Ownership

Where does your organisation stand on ownership of health and safety? Do you have one person whose job is health and safety manager...or is that considered everyone's job? And whichever view your organisation has, it starts with the **leadership** provided by its management.

What happens if there is an incident; does everyone start looking for someone to take the blame, or are you focused on learning as much as possible and making changes to prevent future reoccurrences? Although many organisations believe their approach focuses on **learning rather than blaming**, have a closer look and ask the question: how receptive are you to someone making a mistake and owning up to it? If people are punished for telling the truth, you're teaching them to hide the truth. And if we are not in the habit of telling the truth in our personal life, it's often too much of a stretch to tell the truth at work if we perceive that our career may be on the line.

To what degree do you **'walk the talk'** on a day-to-day basis? Your real attitudes and commitments are demonstrated to the world in the daily choices you make and actions you take. Even more important, your employees will follow your example and behave in the same ways, no matter what you tell them. If you put production ahead of safety, they will do exactly the same and justify it by your example. The interesting thing is that the only real way to address this issue is to look at yourself and make the required changes within yourself; do you have the self-honesty to do this?

Provide models for giving and receiving feedback, and make sure you **accept and act on that feedback**. If you demonstrate openness to suggestions for improvement, your employees will learn to do this, too.

Recognition

For **recognition and rewards programmes** to be effective, it's important to first understand the underlying principles. Managers who simply throw money at people without adequately understanding the drivers behind motivation should not be surprised when it's difficult to identify - let alone quantify - any impact of rewards programmes.

To be an effective motivator, rewards must be **positive, immediate and certain**. In practice, this can be as simple as catching people doing things right and telling them they did a good job! The delays involved in awarding annual bonuses for safety performance make rewards too uncertain and too detached from the desired behaviour to make any meaningful impact on reinforcing desired behaviours and risk creating expectations for

In New Zealand, managers are often reluctant to single any one person out for recognition, not least because of our self-effacing national culture of "The Tall Poppy Syndrome". Yet extensive leadership research has shown that recognition **personal to the individual and coming from their own manager rather than from the company** has the greatest motivational impact. The interesting thing is that it doesn't have to be gifts or monetary rewards; a sincere and heart-felt thanks delivered face-to-face is astonishingly powerful.

There are many choices available to managers to develop and nurture employee motivation. The key is to create a culture that understands and supports personal initiative and contribution, and managers need to be leaders in setting the example for employees to follow. If you don't like the results you're getting, change what YOU are doing. The results just might surprise you.

References

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- *Measure of a Leader – An Actionable Formula for Legendary Leadership* by Aubrey C Daniels and James E. Daniels
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About the Speaker:

Sheri Suckling - EnQuantum Ltd

Owner, Director, Principal Consultant

Sheri Suckling has over 30 years of business experience in a wide range of roles and diverse industries. Many of these roles featured key responsibilities in management systems and compliance requirements. In every case, Sheri has taken the initiative and extended herself through involvement in broader organizational projects, e.g. – taking on additional responsibilities for coaching and developing individual employees, leading learning and development initiatives, building effective teams, encouraging others, fostering personal responsibility, taking the lead in recruitment and selection of senior personnel in the absence of internal HR functions, and providing leadership and innovative approaches to organizational development and company culture.

Sheri has a knack for spotting improvement opportunities before they turn into problems and is adept at guiding people through the chaos of change. She is respected amongst her peers for her commitment to team success results as well as her initiative in providing innovative winning solutions responsive to holistic organizational needs.

Sheri's **qualifications and training** include:

- Bachelor of Science in Chemistry and General Business, completed concurrent with full-time employment with Dow Corning Corporation in Midland, Michigan, USA.
- Master Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), International certification - INLPTA
- AVI Values Inventory (Hall-Tonna) tools
- Spiral Dynamics (Clare Graves) Values & dynamics of change model
- Accelerated Learning – Eric Jensen (USA)
- Accredited Facilitator – Certificate in Applied Leadership – Tai Poutini Polytechnic (2006)

Specific **business training and experience:**

- Lead Assessor of Quality Management Systems
- Recognised Hazardous Substances Advisor (HSNO Act) – ERMANZ
- Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP)
- Food Safety / HACCP

Professional **Memberships** and Associations:

- New Zealand Institute of Safety Management (NZISM) – Auckland Branch Committee
- Human Resources Institute of New Zealand (HRINZ)
- New Zealand Association for Training and Development (NZATD)
- Rotary Club of North Harbour (Rotarian of the Year 2006/07)
- Life Member – XL Results Foundation (international entrepreneurs' network)

Sheri has also been a popular speaker and facilitator for numerous conferences and events and is a sought-after training facilitator. Described by friends and colleagues alike as an energetic and voracious learner devoted to life-long self-improvement and personal development, Sheri continually builds her extensive array of tools and skills and adds further knowledge and skills by attending seminars, exploring ideas and assimilating new ideas and information. She actively maintains extensive professional networks to expand access to learning resources.