

MOTIVATING EMPLOYEES FOR SAFETY SUCCESS

Thomas R. Krause * and Gordon Sellers #

* Behavioral Science Technology, Ojai CA, USA

Behavioural Science Technology International, Bracknell RG12 1JB,
Gordon.Sellers@bstsolutions.com

This paper presents an examination of how to motivate employees for success in safety. That raises a two-fold issue: how to motivate employees; and how to apply that motivation for safety excellence. The difference between “motivation” and “motivation for success” lies in an organisation’s ability to use motivation effectively. Enthusiasm alone is useless unless it can be harnessed and directed properly to improve safety. Motivating employees to be merely enthusiastic about safety is insufficient. We are interested in how to motivate employees to be SUCCESSFUL in safety. Frequently used methods include motivational speakers; slogans, posters and signs; discipline; gain sharing programmes; and contests, awards and incentives. However, building on the work of Herzberg and Deming, we find that the most powerful motivation for workers to be successful in safety comes from active engagement and participation in safety. When employees are given the opportunity to get involved in the improvement process, in real and meaningful ways, then that engagement becomes a tremendous source of motivation. Behaviour-based safety offers such opportunities.

Keywords: motivation, employees, behaviour, safety

WHAT IS MOTIVATION?

A working definition for motivation is:

A force that influences or causes a person to do something or act in a certain way.

So for the purposes of safety motivation the important question is:

How can an organization provide a “force that influences or causes” workers to be successful in the safety effort?

FREQUENTLY USED METHODS

Let us consider the common methods that many organisations frequently use to increase employee motivation for safety, and evaluate how successful each method is likely to be:

- Motivational speakers;
- Slogans, posters and signs;
- Discipline;
- Gain-sharing programmes; and
- Contests, awards and incentives

MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKERS

How many motivational speakers have you heard in your career, and what do you remember of what they said? The purpose of using motivational speakers for safety is to get the attention of workers, fire them up, cause them to feel good and give them energy for the effort. This method is effective in the short term, but loses its effect in a few weeks. The best motivational speakers are those that really do teach employees something that sticks with them rather than simply entertaining, amusing, or enthusing them with no real substance. The

best motivational speakers for safety are clearly the genuine article. The worst motivational speakers are those that are so transparently fake that we get a little sick listening to them. In any case, it is unrealistic to think that having a motivational speaker speak to a workforce will do anything in itself to improve safety at a facility.

SLOGANS, POSTERS AND SIGNS

Slogans, signs and posters are designed to motivate employees to do the things management would like them to do. How effective are they? Do these methods cause workers to do the things that the slogans exhort them to do?

*Zero injuries
Safety first
Pay attention*

It's hard to see how these methods have much to do with anything, other than making the people who put them up feel like they might have accomplished something.

DISCIPLINE

The use of discipline to motivate workers for safety success is a complex issue in today's workplace. It isn't just a matter of what the behavioural scientists tell us about the effect of punishment on behaviour. There are other factors present in the workplace that must be taken into account, things like morale, perceptions of what is "just and fair", and ongoing relations with the work force. Is it possible to use discipline to motivate workers to be successful in safety? We don't think it is. In fact, we think it is counterproductive. However, ironically, in our experience it is possible to de-motivate the worker for safety success by not applying the established discipline policy consistently. (Please note that this last statement does not mean that behaviour-based safety should use discipline as part of its employee-driven observation and feedback process, which we believe is always a mistake.)

GAIN-SHARING PROGRAMMES

Do gain-sharing programmes motivate employees for safety success? This is a difficult issue. For companies that do use gain-sharing programmes (which we believe are usually of marginal value at best) it is better to have safety represented in the programme than not. If safety is not represented, the company risks sending the message that safety isn't important enough to be considered. For these companies the important question is HOW to measure safety for gain-sharing. If they base gain-sharing on incident frequency rates the company is subject to all the problems that go along with incident-based incentive schemes (see below). A better method is to make gain-sharing contingent on an index of indicators that include 'upstream measures' of safety performance as well as statistically valid incident rates. This does not mean that gain-sharing is likely to truly motivate employees to be successful in safety. However, under certain circumstances, it is better to use gain-sharing for safety than to not use it.

CONTESTS, AWARDS AND INCENTIVES

Many companies use various types of safety incentives. Are they successful at motivating employees for safety success? Unfortunately, incentive programs are more often de-motivators than motivators. No company intends this to be the outcome. Nonetheless, it happens in hundreds of companies every year.

The incentives question is a complex one that we have written about extensively in other places¹. Most companies that are serious about safety improvements have discovered that

traditional safety incentives, in which tangible goods are contingent on incident rates, are more trouble than they are worth. These traditional incentives send a mixed message to the culture, create false feedback and set in motion expectations that are counter-productive, such as, “What will you give me next time?” The willingness of the worker to participate in the safety effort becomes contingent on the nature and size of the incentive.

Other companies make their incentive prizes contingent on worker performance of desired behaviours. This approach is an improvement over traditional incentives, but the approach also has aspects that are problematic. Workers are encouraged to “game” the system, and often become motivated for the wrong reasons. One company we worked with tried this type of incentive which they based on a baseball game theme to increase the frequency of its behavioural observations. They were “successful” in creating new observations, but the quality of observations declined dramatically during the same time period, as shown in Figure 1.

Even though they ended up with more observations, they taught their employees to make poor observations and this was detrimental to their real safety objectives.

Perhaps the biggest drawback to the use of incentives for safety is that they tend to drive injuries underground (Figure 2).

Employees know that reporting injuries can result in them losing a significant reward. It is only natural to try hard to keep this information private under those circumstances, which is a very poor outcome for the safety system.

MEANINGFUL INVOLVEMENT

Our experience, gained from working with hundreds of companies for the past 20 years, has shown that the most powerful motivation for workers to be successful in safety comes from **active engagement and participation in safety**. When employees are given the opportunity to get involved in the improvement process, in real and meaningful ways, then that engagement becomes a tremendous source of motivation. Interestingly, this experience is consistent with two of the most credible figures on the landscape in the last 20 years, Herzberg and Deming.

Herzberg² studied motivation very carefully in large numbers of companies across industries. His work was published in Harvard Business Review, originally in the 1970’s and then again in 1987. It is considered a classic in management theory which, in our opinion, has not been surpassed since it was published. In this study Herzberg found that identifiable factors contribute to employee motivation, but interestingly, the factors that contribute to **dissatisfaction** are altogether different from those that contributed to **satisfaction**.

As Figure 3 shows, the factors that contributed to job satisfaction were achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, advancement and growth. Herzberg referred to these factors as “Motivators.” The factors that contributed to job dissatisfaction were company policy and administration, supervision and relations with supervisors, work conditions, salary, peer relations, personal life, subordinate relations, status and security. Herzberg referred to these factors as “Hygiene.” In other words, workers could become “dissatisfied” from hygiene factors such as less money, poor relations with their bosses, etc. However, having more money and good relations with their bosses, etc., does not motivate workers, but makes them “not-dissatisfied” with their jobs. The things that contributed to worker job satisfaction were the motivation factors, such as achievement and recognition.

Herzberg put it this way:

“Motivation is based on growth needs...the ultimate reward in motivation is personal growth...Job enrichment remains the key to designing work that motivates employees.”

What a long way this is from posters, motivational speakers and incentives!

W. Edwards Deming³, the great pioneer in quality improvement, agrees with Herzberg on motivation. He sees that the natural pride that follows good work has a positive effect on the employee:

“If someone can make a contribution to the company, he feels important.”

Deming even goes so far as to say the employee is entitled to this kind of job satisfaction:

“People are entitled to joy in work.”

Clearly Deming sees that incentives, quotas and other attempts to manipulate workers into good performance are counter-productive:

“Forces of Destruction:

- *Grades in school.*
- *Merit System.*
- *Incentive pay.*
- *Business plans.*
- *Quotas.”*

What motivates the employee is being part of the improvement process, being positively engaged:

“You can see from a flow diagram who depends on you and whom you can depend on. You can now take joy in work.”

And of course Deming reminds us that this doesn't happen overnight:

“It does not happen all at once. There is no instant pudding.”

CONCLUSION

It is not enough for workers to be enthusiastic about safety. Motivation methods that produce short-term enthusiasm for safety are often more trouble than they are worth. When employees are given the opportunity to get actively involved in the improvement process, in real and meaningful ways, then that engagement becomes a tremendous source of motivation. Behaviour-based safety offers such opportunities.

REFERENCES

1. Krause, T.R., 1998, Current Issues in Behavior-Based Safety, *Professional Safety*, 21: 247-261
2. Herzberg, F., 1987, One more time: How do you motivate employees?, *Harvard Business Review*, 65(5): 109-120
3. Deming, W.E., 1986, *Out of Crisis*, Boston: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

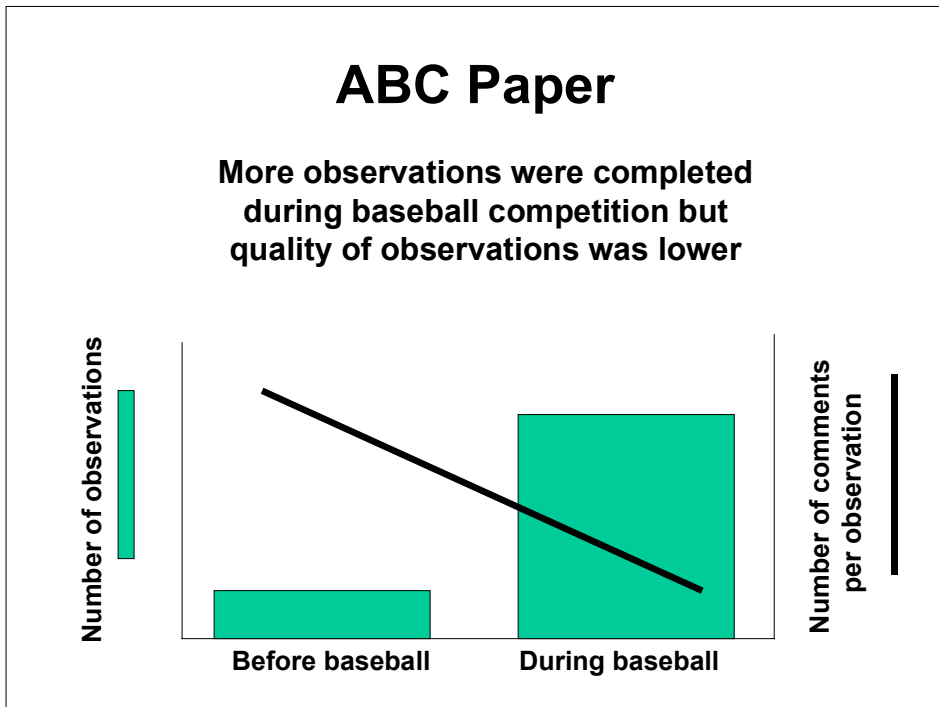


Figure 1. More observations were completed during an incentive programme, but the quality of observations fell

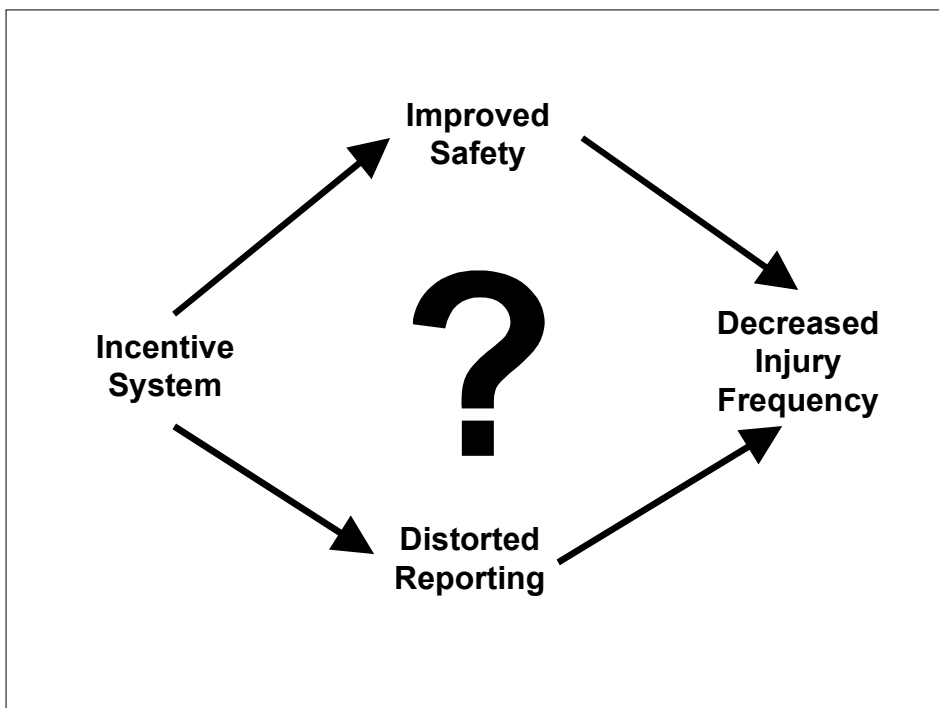


Figure 2. Incentive systems can lead to improved safety – but more often to distorted reporting

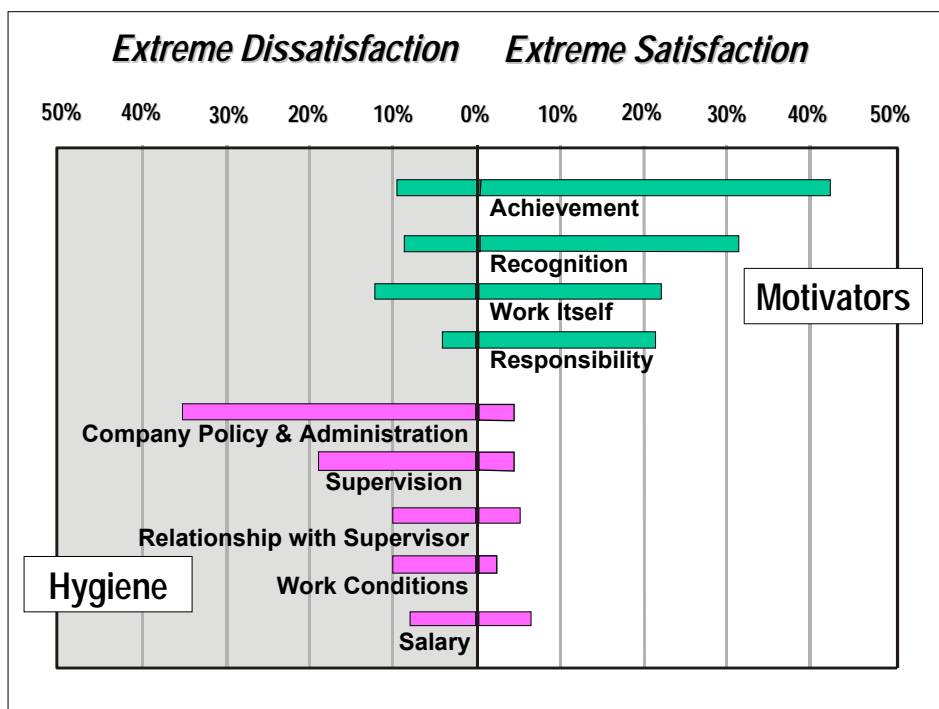


Figure 3. Herzberg's analysis of Motivators and Hygiene Factors