Black Holes of Safety: Gain Visible Progress Through Identification and Prevention

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Imagine a straightforward, sincere request by leadership for employee input on how safety could be improved. A safety suggestion system is created. An opportunity to identify safety-related work orders is established.

An employee decides to place their faith in the appeal and offers a few suggestions. The individual reports a couple of conditional safety improvement recommendations. Another employee decides to finally provide an idea on how a specific task could be handled more safely. Days, weeks, then months pass without a single visible or verbal response.

These employees have just frustratingly discovered a black hole in safety. Unfortunately, the employees at this site are not alone. There are safety black holes everywhere. It takes acknowledging this to successfully remove them. As much as we want to believe we are perfect in all that we do, we must realize that, in organizations, we are not the only variable.

During a *Safety Culture Excellence* podcast released on 27 September 2009, I introduced the term, "Black Hole Safety System".[1] This described a system in which information about safety improvement is entered and, within the perception of the initiator, there are no satisfactory results. A black hole is defined as "*a region of space from which nothing, including light, can escape. It is called 'black' because it absorbs all the light that hits it, reflecting nothing.*"[2] Black Hole Safety Systems are often complicated due to the difficulty in identifying them and the challenge in preventing them.

Three Most Common Black Holes in Safety:

1. **Suggestion Systems**
   Many suggestion systems result in such an onslaught of ideas that it becomes difficult to be able to respond to each contributor with a thank-you. However, this is critical to encourage them to continue to provide their thoughts. Because of this, many administrators of the system will select a few ideas from the mass and provide rewards, resulting in a few winners and a bunch of losers (figuratively speaking, of course). Consider responding to each individual with, at minimum, an appreciation for their ideas as soon as possible after the submission, even if they are not practical or cost-effective. Fostering creative thinking in safety often flows to other operational areas as well. Who wouldn't benefit from additional grassroots innovation?

2. **Safety Work Orders**
   Similar to suggestion systems, it can be difficult to respond to the originator of the request. If we want people to continue to do something to help improvement, we must not rely on internal motivation alone. Instead, ensure they experience a timely and consistent positive consequence. Some companies will post the status of the requests in a public place; others will track down the employee through their supervisor, or in-person, to let them know where the issue stands. Do not rely on the work order fix to be the effective communication. People might forget they turned something in to maintenance and an opportunity for unexpected positive consequence is lost.

3. **First Aid or Near Miss/Hit Reporting**
   It is amazing the amount of first aid or near miss incidents that go unreported in organizations, even with excellent safety management systems. The most common reason is that employees do not think anyone does anything with the information. Moreover, many people do not realize

that the difference between a close-call and a major injury is often seconds or inches. When this information isn't collected and shared, a huge prevention opportunity is missed. The trends, pictures, stories, and lessons learned need to be shared regularly in a way that shows that the organization proactively cares about injury prevention. Take care to remove any blame to employees; rather, focus on what someone can do in the future if they find themselves in a similar situation.

Unintended Creation

Organizational Psychologist, Ian Percy, once said, "We judge others by their behavior. We judge ourselves by our intentions." People typically mean well when asking for employee input, so the creation of a black hole safety system isn't intentional. This is due to the challenge of effective communication: both around the expressed intent of the request for ideas and on the follow-up with the initiator.

According to SUPERMOTIVATION: A blueprint for Energizing Your Organization From Top to Bottom, by Dean Spitzer (1995), "*There is a tendency in all communication toward misunderstanding, conflict, and confusion. In fact, it has been found that as much as 75 percent of all mistakes made in the workplace are due to ineffective communication.*"[3]

If communication is poor, undesirable, or untrue, negative perceptions about safety systems can develop. If not managed, these perceptions may spread throughout the informal communication channels (ie. rumor mills) and potentially become cultural beliefs. Regrettably, many companies are effectively responding to the system input and employees just don't know it.

Visible Progress Collapses a Black Hole Safety System

After completing a multi-year study in which employees were asked to track their daily activities in a journal, Amabile and Kramer published their results in the January-February 2010 issue of Harvard Business Review. There they stated, "*A close analysis of nearly 12,000 diary entries, together with the writers' daily ratings of their motivation and emotions, shows that making progress in ones work – even incremental progress – is more frequently associated with positive emotions and high motivation than any other work day event.*"[4]

Visible progress is motivational, and it turns out it's critical to facilitate the collapse of a black hole safety system. Motivational and performance experts have, for years, stated that the biggest negative influence on desirable behavior is demotivators. If we take an honest look at our safety systems, we will see that black holes exist everywhere, and they are quite demotivational. If you want additional employee input or involvement, and there are already systems in place to leverage, begin by first gathering insight on why they aren't being used. Shining light on this will often help you discover your first black hole. Identifying the problem, many say, is the first step to improvement. The next step is up to you.

References:

1. http://www.safetycultureexcellence.com/2009/09/27/96-%e2%80%93-discovering-and-correcting-a-black-hole-safety-system/

2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_hole accessed 22:25 08 May 2010

3. SUPERMOTIVATION: A Blueprint for Energizing Your Organization From Top to Bottom by Dean Spitzer pg 113-114

4. Amabile, Teresa M. and Kramer, Steven J., "What Really Motivates Workers: Understanding the power of progress," Harvard Business Review, January-February 2010, Pages 44-45

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