

Do you have safety “volun-tolds”?

Written by Shawn M. Galloway
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It starts with a simple request: “We are looking for volunteers to help us improve safety. Those who are interested, please tell the safety manager.” A couple of weeks pass and the number of interested parties who stepped forward is a bit less than desirable. Do you start selecting people?

Many [safety improvement efforts](#) begin with a request for willing and interested individuals. In the absence of a strong, excellent and [participative safety culture](#), it is likely that few will volunteer. With pressure to continue moving forward, rather than understanding the reason for a lack of volunteerism, many progress through forced selection. Instead of volunteers, you end up with “volun-tolds”.

Involvement de-motivators

What influences someone to not want to be involved in something as important as safety? The answer is surprisingly simple: de-motivators. Most people are, by nature, internally motivated. Little external motivation is necessary to encourage someone to have pride in their work, feel a sense of accomplishment, and want to do their best.

In his article, written for *EHS Today*, ProAct Safety founder Terry Mathis wrote, “More recent research suggests that most workers are motivated to do a good job and that the design of many of those jobs actually dampen their intrinsic motivation. In other words, workers arrive motivated, and either their jobs or bosses beat (figuratively, of course) the motivation out of them.”

Have you ever started your day in a good mood, only to have it changed for the worse throughout the day as a result of something that occurred at work? Becoming de-motivated or feeling contempt for your job is something that many people experience. When de-motivators impact people’s opinions of safety, an unfortunate and disastrous perception is developed.

A Google search for “safety is a joke” resulted in 67,100 responses. When people feel that safety is a joke, it is difficult to motivate the discretionary effort critical for obtaining and sustaining excellence.

Consequently, the request for volunteers for a new safety project falls on deaf ears.

Perceptions influences

Unlike other activities that occupy an employee’s time within their work setting, safety is something that provides both external and internal benefits. Understanding this, why would anyone hesitate to participate?

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The answer — de-motivators — is not inclusive enough to identify how to solve the problem. The complete, yet complicated, answer is that de-motivators create perceptions that influence both individual and group decisions, and can become “the new way we do things around here.”

Sometimes this perception results from a solitary bad experience for a single, influential individual. This person then shares their perspective with peers. What often follows is the creation of a group perception that culturally reinforces from within. When new employees are brought into the team, they are also influenced by these perspectives. Cultural reinforcement is a strong and often ignored aspect of occupational safety.

To change perceptions, one must first understand the influence on the perception. You can force short-term behavioural change, but is that really the goal?

You cannot force a perceptual change because it is an internal response within individuals. The old saying is true, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.” Nor can you force an epiphany. To change perceptions, new experiences must be created that offer the opportunity to influence perceptual changes.

Common perceptions that impact safety volunteerism

While not complete, the following are common responses provided during employee interview sessions. As you read them, consider if they exist within your organization.

- **Employee suggestions and safety work order systems result in no status response.** If employees are putting forth suggestions or safety work order requests and do not receive status updates, what motivates them to continue? This can be classified as a negative consequence. The result of a negative consequence is to stop behaviour. Guess what kind of behaviour it stops?
- **Existing volunteers are ineffective.** If employees feel that previous involvement did not result in improvement, what will motivate them to participate again? Moreover, if the group feels that participants were themselves ineffective, the potential volunteer might not want to have that negative stigma attached to them.
- **Safety efforts are not currently focusing on the biggest risk.** If employees feel safety is out of touch with their perception of reality, they might want to participate if other de-motivators are not present. However, if there have been previous attempts of worker involvement that did not result in improvement in their areas of concern, they might view this new opportunity as more of the same.
- **Production is a more often communicated priority.** People pay attention to what their boss talks about most. If production is mentioned more often than safety, a perception will be created that says production is a more important value. If this is the case, then employees might not want to volunteer as they might feel it is in their best interest to work towards the business elements that are appreciated most.

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- **There is lack of visible support from an immediate supervisor.** A supervisor may inherently care about safety. However, if the leader does not actively promote involvement in safety, an undesirable perception will be created. Moreover, if the supervisor actively discourages involvement then, absent a strong internal determination for safety, this will most likely stop an individual from participating.
- **Fear of punishment for involvement.** If an employee feels they will be punished, formally or informally, for doing other activities than their job, this will certainly de-motivate involvement. One employee stated in an interview, “Every time I would get back from the safety task, my boss would give me the worst jobs.” Another stated, “Whenever I would ask to break-away to help safety, my supervisor would complain and moan about how short-staffed she was. So I stopped asking.”

Takeaway principle

If an employee feels there is a stronger incentive to not be involved, or if they fear negative consequence for involvement, can we rightfully expect volunteers? The predominant school of thought on performance management is that the internal motivation for involvement is already there, so we should just remove the barriers. Certainly, it is easier to simply select “volun-tolds” or offer participation incentives than to do the hard work of creating a desirable culture free of de-motivators.

Moreover, do we want people to be involved because they are chasing a carrot or avoiding a stick? Or, do we want people to be involved because they proactively care and feel recognized for helping to create a great and safe place to work?

Continuing to select “volun-tolds” in safety, rather than creating an environment in which people want to participate, will generate or perpetuate a belief that safety is indeed a joke. Safety is no laughing matter.

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