



THE THREE-MINUTE WONDER

We've all had those stunned moments where we wonder "why did they do that?" as we stare in disbelief at an employee behaving unsafely. We need to go beyond rules to build engagement – we can change worker risk perception in just three minutes ...

You've seen them, right? The images – in magazines and on the internet – of those adrenalin-fuelled daredevils hell-bent on extreme sports? You catch your breath as you marvel at how they push the limits to manage the ultra-fine balance between life and death.

As we stare in awe, are we witnessing a super-high degree of skill, learned through years of dedicated practice. Are they just lucky, or plain stupid? What's in their minds? Why do they do it?

Now, to set the record straight, I'll admit to some pretty unusual hobbies. B.A.S.E. jumping, paragliding, sea kayaking, motorcycling and swimming with sharks would all feature in the "hobbies and interests" section of my CV.

I'm not referring to these sorts of activities here, however. In fact, to be abundantly clear, I don't even consider these "extreme" sports. They are (at least to me) simply an activity with a degree of risk to be managed – just like football, rugby, martial arts, trail

running – and, arguably, even ping-pong and almost any other sport you can think of.

Rather, I'm referring to those idiots on ladders ... The chap repairing the roof, the bloke installing the new satellite dish. Those two guys who realise they don't have enough scaffolding, and so create an alternative access using whatever comes to hand.

These include: the worker stretching out to connect a cable just out of reach; the engineer replacing a broken streetlamp; the painter leaning out to get that last little bit ... These aerial acrobats have become so popular that some folk can't resist a guilty giggle and a quick photograph, shared with their friends and, ultimately, destined for immortal life in a safety toolbox talk.

THERE'S ALWAYS ONE

It doesn't matter where we are in the world, we're likely to find at least one ... Arriving at Nairobi's Jomo-Kenyatta International Airport yesterday, there he was, waiting for me – free-climbing up the side of a tower



scaffold some eight metres high as its wheels danced the metal tower across the baggage hall. What a welcoming party!

Some of you, as health and safety practitioners, may have even found them in your own workplace. Only last week, during a site visit, the factory manager I was with did a double-take as we turned a corner to find a forklift truck – engine running, driver in his seat, forks raised to maximum height – balancing a “working platform” made out of an old pallet, upon which stretched upwards the longest ladder I’d ever seen.

Right at the top, many metres above us, was an intrepid maintenance technician – clearly no sufferer of vertigo – wrench in hand, attempting to fix a leaking pipe. A few metres away, a pile of temporary scaffolding pipes and clips sat silently, just begging to be noticed.

Stepping beyond their apparent commitment to “getting the job done” and their creativity in building access equipment out of everyday items, what’s happening inside the heads of these workers? Why is it that they seem so oblivious to the very real and present danger in which they place themselves? The answer lies in a combination of understanding and risk perception.

THE PERCEPTION OF GOLDEN RULES

Many organisations today have “Golden Rules” for safety. The logic behind them is sensible: identify the biggest risks of fatal or serious injuries and create an absolute non-negotiable rule for their control. For example, many of our clients have, in the past, typically generated a rule such as: “All work at height must be properly controlled. Those working at height must always wear a harness and be clipped on at all times.” This doesn’t mean that it always happens like that, does it?

Just a few weeks ago, I’d been through a pretty robust site safety induction before being taken for a tour around a large construction site in downtown Johannesburg. This creation of a new global headquarters was indeed awe-inspiring. With many floors towering above ground level, the building was magnificent in terms of both size and its architectural splendour.

The site’s “Golden Rules” were fresh in my mind. Rule number four states: “Work at Height means any work performed more than 1,2 m above the ground. Harnesses and lanyards must be inspected before each use. Workers must always clip on to a secure point when working at height.” Straightforward and clear, I thought.

Venturing out onto the site I stood in what would become the main reception area; a vast space, which would become replete with a massive vaulted glass ceiling. From here I felt like a tiny ant as I looked up at the galleries of each floor above me.

Climbing the scaffolding staircase we ascended towards the roof. On the fifth floor, however, we had cause to pause. Two men, kneeling on the floor, were working to install the fittings on which to attach the gallery windows. Both of them were wearing harnesses; neither of them were clipped on.

When asked about the “Golden Rule” for working at height, their response was spot on: “You must clip on if you are more than 1,2 m up.” I was surprised, however, when he added: “We are sitting on the ground, though, not on a scaffolding, or ladder, so it doesn’t apply to us here.”

Even when my guide nodded towards the drop of five floors, just a metre or two from where the man sat, he was still puzzled. His understanding was that he must have actually climbed up something first to make the rule come into play.

Although he knew he was on the fifth floor of a skeleton-like, work-in-progress structure, and had been up and down on all levels every day for several weeks, he simply couldn’t see the very real, and very serious, risk of falling from height right in front of him.

To this man, all was normal. He spent his day installing window brackets, usually while sitting or kneeling on the ground. Sometimes on level one, sometimes level three, four, five or ten. He had become so familiar with the heights that he didn’t perceive the risk, or see why the rule was applicable to him.



RIGHT:

"The absence of accidents doesn't equal the existence of safety," says Sharman.

ABSENCE MAKES THE HEAD FEEL STRONGER

Further discussions with the worker revealed that he had never fallen from a height in his career; he'd "always been careful" he added. This notion – that a wealth of experience makes us invincible to risk – is reinforced in some people because "it's never happened to me".

However, as I argue in my book *From Accidents to Zero*, the absence of accidents does not equal the existence of safety. Whether it's your data charts presented to the executive, or a worker's perception of risk, I'll say it again: the absence of accidents just doesn't equal the existence of safety.

What can we do to improve worker risk awareness and perception? It's all too easy to yell at the worker who is getting it wrong, to "Get down! Clip on! Stop!" However, what happens in that moment where you're not there to shout some sense into them?

Whether it's working at height, or any other potentially risky work task, perhaps it's time for a different approach. In our bid to create safety in the workplace, employee engagement is vital. It's time to build dialogue, rather than assume understanding of rules.

Instead of telling workers to "be safe", which you know often falls on deaf ears, try asking them: "What is slow, inconvenient or uncomfortable about doing this job safely?" This is a sure-fire winner to get them thinking. You'll either receive a suggestion for

improvement, or confirmation that things are under control.

Both of these approaches provide room for a follow-up: "So, if I were working with you today, what would I need to know in order to go work safely?" More thinking is encouraged, and verbalisation of the risks and procedures associated with the job. This serves as salient reminder to the worker.

If you spot a risk that's not been mentioned, this can be dropped into the conversation at this point and the discussion can be continued. You might even try: "So what could we do to make this task even safer?"

YOUR THREE MINUTE WONDER

Safety dialogues like this can be done at any time, by anyone, and without the need for special training. They take just two or three minutes and they're an efficient and impactful way for managers and supervisors to use, on a daily basis, to boost risk awareness around the workplace.

You can create your own variations of the questions to ask. The "Golden Rules" here are to keep them open-ended and positive, so as to encourage workers to describe and explain the issues.

The time for "toolbox talks" showing photos of idiots on ladders has passed. Let's move beyond "superheroes on stilts" and use good old-fashioned conversation to engage, empower and equip our workers with enhanced risk-perception skills. **SM**



Sharman on Safety is a series of extracts that SHEQ MANAGEMENT is running this year, from Andrew Sharman's new book: *From Accidents to Zero: a practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture*. Andrew is an international member of the South African Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (SAIOSH) and chief executive of RyderMarshSharman - consultants on leadership and cultural excellence to a wide range of blue-chip corporates and non-government organisations globally. More at www.rydermarshsharman.com. SHEQ MANAGEMENT readers will receive 20 percent off the price of Sharman's book at: www.fromaccidentstozero.com using the code SHEQSA.

From Accidents to Zero

A practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture

Thought-provoking and insightful. From Accidents to Zero progressively pushed me to see new connections, and new ways to address organisations' safety culture and risk management challenges.

Mieke Jacobs, Global Practice Leader – Employee Safety, DuPont

This A to Z of safety represents an eminently practical knowledge toolbox, one filled with tools which will add value to the CEO and the front line Safety Practitioner in equal measures. Relevant, accessible and applicable, this is safety distilled and a 'must-read'.

Steven Brown, Brewery Manager, Heineken

Read more at www.fromaccidentstozero.com

