

Behavioural Safety

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Catching the safety virus: the power and potency of social contagion

By Andrew Sharman Posted May 11, 2016 In Behavioural Safety, Culture And Behaviours



It's that time of year isn't it? The guy on the train sneezes, and a couple of days later you've caught his cold. Your kid comes back from school with a runny nose, and soon you have the same. The teacher helpfully adds that "most of the children have the same right now". There's something 'going around'.

When a friend suffers a loss, it's hard for us not to become bound by the same feelings as we empathise and grieve with them. As you gather round to watch a relative blow out the candles on her birthday cake, you can't help but feel her excitement and smile too. What's happening here? At the University of San Diego James Fowler & Nick Christakis found that **emotions are contagious** – just like the common cold. For example, if you have a happy friend, the chance of you becoming happier when around them jumps by nearly 25%.

Behaviours are contagious too

The same San Diego study revealed that if you have an overweight amigo, your chances of reaching for a Big Mac rise. But if a buddy signs up for a local fun run, it's more likely you'll also sign up. And towards the end of an evening out we've all felt the pulling power of the phrase "one for the road?"

Scientists call this phenomena '**social contagion**' and it's likely that it stems from our intrinsic desire to want to 'fit in' and 'go with the flow' – particularly with those we hold in esteem, such as family and friends.

But does this social contagion operate in the workplace? In the Harvard Business Review Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman present results of a new study that reveal 30 different behaviours can be actively transferred from leaders to managers to employees. They found that positive behaviours – including integrity, honesty, decisiveness and cooperation – can be directly passed from person to person. Unsurprisingly, negative behaviours like poor communication skills, selfishness, narrow-mindedness and dishonesty can also trickle down individually from level to level of an organisation's hierarchical structure.

The report found that senior leaders doing a sub-optimal job erode not only the engagement levels of direct reports, but also the engagement of those working for them. Fortunately, the opposite also holds true: if you're a great leader, your positive behaviour engages your team *and* your team's team. It's a win-win-win. This study reinforces a message we often share with our clients: "Leadership is everything you do, and everything you don't do".

In safety we may often wonder whether we are *truly* making an impact. Remember that behaviour change is often subtle and occurs over time. Time to think about your own behaviour for a moment: maybe there's one or two aspects or bad habits you're not especially proud of or feel embarrassed about. When we consider the power of social contagion, perhaps this offers some additional motivation for change, given that the things you do as a safety leader have a fair chance of being picked up and copied by those around you.

In my book **From Accidents to Zero** I call this social contagion when applied to workplace H&S '**viral safety**'. Your challenge then, as a great safety leader, is to choose the positive behaviours you wish to infect your peers and stakeholders with in order to build your safety culture and drive great performance.

*Andrew's best-selling book **From Accidents to Zero: A Practical Guide to Improving Your Workplace Safety Culture** is available to SHP readers with an **exclusive 25% discount**. Use the code **SHP25** at www.fromaccidentstozero.com to order your copy now.*

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