TALKING ABOUT A (R)EVOLUTION

Creating a great safety culture requires evolution not a revolution argues **Andrew Sharman**. Here he outlines four important steps to achieve this.

I was privileged to speak recently at one of the global Technology Entertainment Design (TED) conferences. The overarching theme for the event was *perpetual (r)evolution* so as I prepared and wrote my talk, I explored the difference between revolution and evolution.

My research led me to the point where I began to notice stark differences between the two concepts. I felt that *revolution* was like a wheel, rotating around a central axis, though moving around the wheel essentially retains the same shape, size, and function.

On the other hand, *evolution* implies a sense of proactive development. Whether we think of the evolution of mankind, mobile telephones, or approaches to safety, it's clear that spinning our wheels isn't a great option.

This begs a few questions – how can we prevent our safety efforts from losing grip and what are the secrets to building an approach that evolves as our organisational safety culture develops?

I suggest that there are four key elements that we must focus our attention on – we must *encourage* people to get involved; *engage* them fully; *enable* them to work in safety; and *empower* them to take action.

Encourage

Think about your own choices in life. Why do you do the things you do? I'll hazard a guess that there is almost always something that motivates you to take certain action. Perhaps you've learned a new language, taken up a new sport or hobby, stopped smoking, or visited a country or city you'd never dreamed of going to before. What prompted you to do this? Perhaps there was some specific encouragement from someone or something that provided the initial motivation to act. In the workplace it goes the same way – without encouragement, people simply won't do certain things. Gentle encouragement is effective in focusing attention on what's required and getting folks ready to move in the right direction.

Engage

We cannot *do* safety to people; the route to success is to *engage* people and work *with* them to identify challenges, solutions and approaches. It continues to amaze me how many organisations invest huge amounts of time, money and resources developing very sophisticated safety improvement programmes, campaigns and tools almost in secret in the health and safety department only to be met with a lack of take-up by their workers. Critically consider the way that your organisation approaches safety – is it *to* or *with* the people?

Enable

Once we have gained the attention of our audience, *encouraged* them to get involved and then gained their commitment to *engage* with us we need to equip them with the skills, knowledge and tools to *enable* them to work in safety. Enabling people isn't about *telling them* what to do; it's about building the competence and confidence to allow them to understand how to do it for themselves.

Empower

We learn something from everything we do, and we use these experiential learnings as we face the next challenge or action that crosses our path. Where we find things that go well, or bring us positive results, we tend to repeat the successful actions. Generating the space and security to allow people to practise what we've asked of them is crucial.

Change is the new norm. Whether we like it or not, as human beings we choose to evolve or revolve every day. In *On the Origin of Species* Charles Darwin pointed out back in the mid 19th century: "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent... It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."

There is a far stronger correlation between worker involvement in safety and incidence rates than there is between compliance and incidence rates. On our journey towards safety excellence we must move beyond compliance being the goal and instead find ways to encourage interaction and facilitate empowerment. Creating a great safety culture requires *evolution* not a *revolution*. ■

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