

Fear - Does it work in Safety?

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Everywhere you go, you see companies publishing documents and more, telling everyone they must follow the safety rules or else. I have spoken with many different types of people from safety professionals to company officers and all seem to have the same thought, "Safety is a condition of employment." It fascinates me. We do this and promote this and yet we still have the same results - Look at our national statistics where our fellow Americans have fallen by over 5000 per year for the last few years. Does fear work in promoting safety?

There are many who tout fear does work. I really cannot disagree. Think about that, at some point in our life, fear actually worked to keep us from doing something we knew was unsafe or other act. Some say it has to be part of the process in order for it to have any impact and again, you would be right. We should really stop and think about what is really going on when we use fear as our main way of promoting safety.

It seems funny that we use fear to make people work safe. Isn't our profession about finding ways to help change people and the way they work and act? Isn't using fear just a shortcut? Most people for some reason or another think they are clever. "If clever people have one defining characteristic, it is that they do not want to be led."¹

It is amazing; most people see their company's policies as a nuisance, including the leadership. E. Scott Geller expresses the fundamental truth about fear, "Bottom line: It's difficult to scare people into performing a certain behavior when it's easy to see that almost everyone else is not practicing the desired response."² Is creating a better environment about the carrot and the stick or is it building trust between each co-worker?

Our world closes us off. We live in boxes where fear keeps us from venturing out, fear stops us from helping someone stuck on the side of the road, and fear stops us from actually trying something new that will help us each and every day. Why do we have to prove the WIIFM (what's in it for me) scenario? Why is fear in the driver's seat?

"Individuals come to know their own attitudes, emotions, and other internal states partially by inferring them from observations of their own overt behavior and/or the circumstances in which this behavior occurs."² Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*, points out how in our technological society, it is the human touch that spreads success not the things.

"Companies that successfully create and communicate signature experiences understand that different types of people will excel at different companies, and that not all workers want the same things."³ That signature experience includes safety. The definition is, "a visible, distinctive element of an organization's overall employee experience."³ The authors expanded this experience to include everyday routines, processes, the company's history and leadership ethos. People will do what they must to keep the paycheck coming, but few will take ownership when it's only about the company policy. Zig Ziglar so profoundly expressed, "People don't care how much you know, until they know how much you care."

No wonder our safety programs fall short. We tie it to rewards as if to say it's about the money. We tie it to a condition of employment, do this or else. Why can't we simply tie it to the fact we won't have a friend, a job, a company, a community? Fear does work for a time, but when you get paid by the piece or you are told to get it done no matter what, what are you going to do? Look at your program, your co-workers, what message is REALLY being sent? This is a challenge to all who lead, formally or informally, other people.

¹"Leading Clever People". Rob Goffee and Gareth Jones. *Harvard Business Review*, March 2007, p. 80.

²*The Participation Factor: How to Increase Involvement in Occupational Safety*. E. Scott Geller, PhD. 2002, p. 31, p. 60.

³"What it Means to Work Here". Tamara J. Erickson and Lynda Gratton. *Harvard Business Review*, March 2007. p. 106.