

Ego is **not** a dirty word

Safety interventions based on behaviour are often regarded as the champagne of safety management. **Dr Travis Kemp** finds out if this an effective approach for the longer term.

Behaviourally based safety interventions have become widely acknowledged as being core to best practice occupational health and safety strategy. While they often deliver significant reductions in injury frequency and severity, these gains may often plateau or regress over time unless the underlying foundations of safe behaviour are continuously and diligently reinforced.

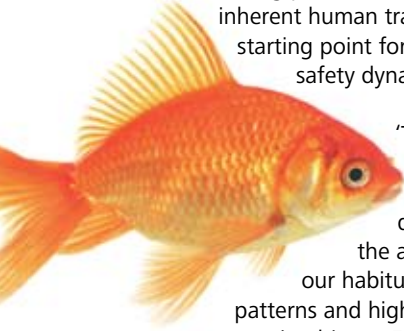
Traditionally, these approaches emphasised behaviour over cognition, arguing that one's thoughts are less relevant to achieving safety compliance than the actual behaviour itself. While there are many valid reasons for adopting this approach, a purely behavioural approach to developing a safety culture may overlook the many complex and critical dynamics that influence safety behaviour moment-by-moment. By applying a broader understanding of the numerous human factors that underpin and drive

safety culture, learning and development interventions stand to deliver more impact and self-sustaining improvements to an organisation's safety performance.

We're only human

The safety dynamics model (Figure 1) outlines the key human factors influencing safety behaviour. By reflecting on people's cognition, or thinking, we can explore a myriad of ways of thinking common to all humans.

In addition, each person's own unique thinking patterns, coupled with these inherent human traits, is a valuable starting point for understanding safety dynamics.



'Thinking about our thinking' serves to question

the accuracy of our habitual cognitive patterns and highlights common processing biases. For example,

behavioural confirmation — the tendency of people, over time, to begin to behave as others expect them to behave — is well researched as directly influencing how we interact with another person. Hence, all subsequent interactions with that person result in similar behaviour being replicated. The same can be said for safety behaviour.

This bias gives rise to phenomena such as the halo effect where a single or multiple traits of an individual are judged as either good or bad. This judgement is then associated to all aspects of that person. Once established it tends to persist, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Clearly, these factors can impact significantly on the success of any safety-focused intervention.

How we feel impacts safety

Perhaps a slightly more radical notion is the impact and importance of emotion within the safety dynamics model. By reflecting on our feelings we can develop a deeper insight into the powerful impact that emotions have on the other three human factors.

If we can better understand how we behave in the face of frustration, anger, elation and a host of other emotions that surface in the

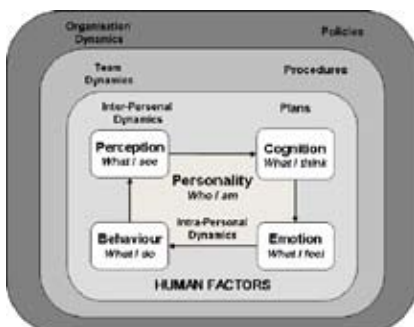


Figure 1: Safety dynamics



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People's personalities and thought patterns will affect their attitudes and responses toward safety.

“Individuals most likely to demonstrate safe work practices commonly show average levels of emotional balance, stress resilience and a solid sense of self-esteem.”

workplace, the better we can notice them and manage how we respond emotionally. This ability is particularly important in predicting responses within high-risk settings given the debilitating impact that emotion has on rational thinking.

Employees who understand intimately their behavioural patterns, and that of those around them, can refine their behavioural responses. If a worker's tendency is to withdraw, for example, from strong interpersonal conflict, it is imperative that strategies for addressing this are explored before entering into any high-risk work task. If this is not addressed, it may well compromise safety in a team environment.

It's a team effort

Finally, we must examine our perceptions of the people we work alongside, the situations we face daily and the broad environment in which we operate. Exploring the unique notions of objective and subjective danger lies at the core of developing a strong safety culture. Because our beliefs and perceptions tend to persist, it is important for work teams to frequently identify and challenge any stereotypes that emerge.

What's your personality?

Further to this is the combined effect of these human factors leading to what we commonly term personality. Ground-breaking work by renowned personality psychologist Rob Hogan has established strong links between personality and safety compliance.

Individuals most likely to demonstrate safe work practices commonly demonstrate average levels of emotional balance, stress resilience and a solid sense of self-esteem. They are highly conscientious, self-controlled, follow the rules, are detail-oriented, focused on procedures, are not overly impulsive and have low-to-average extraversion. They willingly work as part of a team without needing to be the centre of attention. Finally, safety-compliant individuals are approachable, trusting and able to build solid relationships with those around them.

The growing and strengthening evidence supporting the predictive power of personality and safety compliance is compelling, making the inclusion of this analysis within safety systems vital to their ultimate sustainability. ■