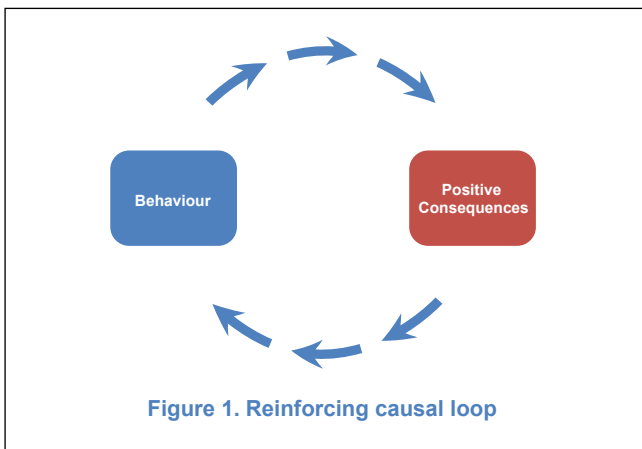


Model behaviour

Is there a link between business performance and a company's safety record? Research into this theory is limited, but do the tools of the learning organisation have a place in building a safety culture? Curtin University's **Yang Miang Goh and Helen Brown** explain.



In this age of the global financial crisis more and more organisations are cutting costs and deferring all discretionary expenditure. More often than not safety is captured in this net and safety programmes, safety training and new safety initiatives are cancelled or deferred.

This approach sends two messages to the workforce: safety is a discretionary expenditure; and safety is not as important as profit. History shows that in times of organisational stress and change, accident rates increase, so now is not the appropriate time to decrease your safety effort but rather to increase efforts to show strong safety leadership with a focus on effective and more efficient safety programmes and training. In any business, a strong safety culture relies on a background of learning, one that ensures feedback to management that ultimately improves safety.

The five disciplines

In the 1990s, research by Peter Senge, an expert in organisational learning, supported the idea of a learning organisation made up of employees skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge. Senge presented five core disciplines: personal mastery; mental models; shared vision; team learning; and systems thinking. The final discipline, systems thinking, is the focus of this article. It is the cornerstone of a learning organisation because it helps us to see the relationship between events and the 'big picture', in other words, what influences the way we behave.

Causal loops — the interaction

Systems thinking is about seeing the forest and the trees. One of the tools to understand the complexity of the 'forest' — or how events and actors interact — is the causal loop. This can be used to understand the possible underlying causes influencing and reinforcing (see Figure 1) the values, beliefs and behaviour of workers. This understanding brings with it the opportunity to invest in resources that result in programmes and a safety culture that can be successfully sustained. The last key component is delays: impatience and a lack of understanding on why positive results are delayed, often cause programmes to be terminated prematurely.

A case to watch

A common problem is that safety programmes can plateau then fall by the wayside. This pattern can lead to programme after programme being introduced and a workforce is drained by the constant need to learn new systems. The management principle offered by Senge is: "don't push the reinforcing process, remove (or weaken) the source of limitations". Here the causal loop suggests focusing on investment into resources. This can mean the difference between one or more programmes with spectacular, but short-lived successes or a sustained programme.

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