

EMPLOYING SOFT SKILLS TO DRIVE CHANGE

By Cory J. Grimmer

Early in my professional career, I experienced an unexpected, career-altering shift in my philosophical thinking. Looking back, I'm not certain that I understood the negative ramifications of my approach.

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However, I am grateful that this uncomfortable experience occurred earlier rather than later in my career because it truly shaped the way I view workplace compliance, as this shift in thinking provided me with a perspective on approaching difficult situations.

What I find interesting is that I honestly cannot remember the individual or the circumstance that drove this conversation, but I remember the person's response. As I recall, I must not have liked what the employee was doing at the time because I really let him have it. As I stood there, yelling at him for making a mistake, he patiently listened. Once finished, I remember feeling proud of myself for standing up to him; after all, I was the one in control, right? As he looked at me, he calmly posed a single question: "Do I treat you bad?" This immediately took me by surprise. After stopping to collect my thoughts, I answered him: "No, I suppose not." Nearly 20 years later, his response is still firmly etched in my memory: "Then please don't treat me that way."

We have all heard of the Golden Rule, the guiding principle taught from a young age to always treat others as you want to be treated. I never realized the wisdom and power of this simple, yet profound statement.

This defining experience has since provided me with guidance. I relate back to it often as I face difficult challenges and noncompliance alike in the workplace. By focusing on the positive, I have experienced the psychological shift that occurs when safety leaders move away from a compliance-driven and aggressive approach to one of genuine concern and empathy for individual workers.

According to Anderson (2015), "True leaders reprimand their people from a place of love and a genuine desire to help them improve. They reprimand without anger, and they relay feedback in a direct, yet kind and respectful way."

Far too many managers only know to administer rules with an aggressive, discipline-first approach to noncompliance. Managers who believe they are making a cultural difference by addressing noncompliance in this manner are disillusioned. Not only is this ineffective, but it may be critically damaging to their efforts in building a successful, effective internal safety culture.

No matter the position, industry or field of employment, each of us has witnessed some degree of noncompliance in the workplace. The ability to ef-

fectively address it is a skill set that many struggle to grasp, let alone refine.

The overarching objective is to drive behavioral change. This can be extremely difficult when managers address issues emotionally or authoritatively with an aggressive approach. While compliance and enforcement, including discipline, must be an important part of an effective safety program, remember that discipline does not equal punishment. According to Safety Management Group (2014), "Handled effectively, discipline can actually be a form of positive motivation and reinforcement. When discipline is approached solely as punishment, it creates resentment."

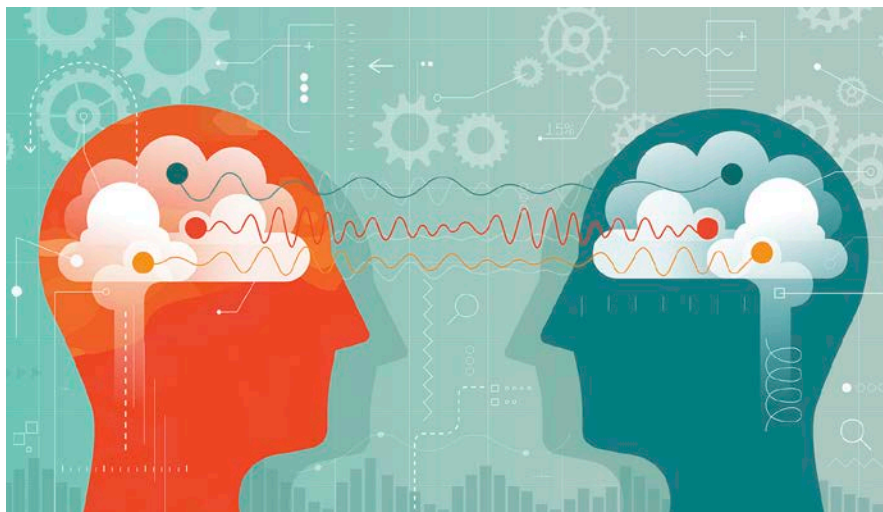
Managers must develop the necessary soft skills to be effective leaders. Soft skills that are essential for OSH professionals include several areas:

- Conflict management.** At some stage in their career, all safety managers will be faced with conflict. It is essential to manage this conflict with some level of resilience and confidence when faced with tough situations. Never react with emotion. Stepping away may be necessary to collect oneself. However, do not ignore conflict or expect issues to become resolved on their own. Be willing to concede when wrong and remain calm in the face of adversity.

- Problem-solving.** Relying solely on professional experience and knowledge to solve problems will only take a safety manager so far. When you do not have all of the information or know the answer to a question, be transparent and explain that you will get back to the employee with an answer. Be willing to leave your comfort zone and ask for assistance when necessary. Quick, impulsive responses to problems are rarely the most effective solutions. Take the time to assess needs and approach problem-solving systematically.

- Maintaining professional integrity.** Professional integrity refers to one's ability to live in accordance with the moral and ethical principles valued within one's profession. Maintaining integrity, regardless of the challenges, will allow safety managers to maintain professionalism, trustworthiness and honesty as they seek to drive change in the workplace.

- Communication.** Successful managers must have a desire to coach, facilitate, develop and train workers. This takes continuous, sometimes nuanced and sensitive communication (Tarallo, 2019). The ability to communicate may be the single most important skill that an OSH professional can bring to



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the table for effective safety management. Knowing your people and understanding the best way to share information with them is essential, as not everyone communicates in the same manner. Knowledge of regulatory requirements and the ability to assess workplace hazards only go so far without the ability to communicate with employees at all levels of management.

Consider the following when handling workplace noncompliance:

1. Employees are the organization's greatest asset. Keep this in mind when addressing workplace issues. If employees were fired or disciplined for making a mistake, not only would this result in the loss of the expertise and knowledge each worker brings to the team, workplace morale would likely suffer as well, resulting in employee retention challenges. Remember that driving change to correct performance is the objective, not workplace discipline.

2. Consider an alternative approach to progressive discipline. While discipline may be necessary in some situations, assessing options may be a more effective approach. Options could include providing necessary employee training, providing performance coaching, facilitating resolution in conjunction with the violating employee, or informally addressing the issue directly with the employee. Should alternative methods prove ineffective, progressive discipline remains an option (Tarallo, 2019).

3. Maintain a consistent approach. One of the easiest ways to compromise one's credibility is by picking and choosing who and when to discipline for similar offenses. Consistency in application is critical. Whether it be the superstar team member who climbed up without fall protection, exposing themselves to a fall hazard, or the employee who consistently challenges management, apply the rules evenly and consistently. This will help the safety professional gain respect as a manager and gain respect for their process.

4. Treat others with respect no matter how severe the violation. Leaders who have learned

the value of maintaining respect when addressing noncompliance are more likely to achieve a change in work habits from employees. Driving compliance with this in mind will yield groundbreaking results.

Remember, compliance begins with and is driven by management. Workplace noncompliance is discouraged when management at each level models the behaviors they desire. Leadership is ultimately responsible for creating the culture within an organization. Leading by example sets the tone for employees and helps improve compliance (Power DMS, 2020).

Conclusion

Utilizing soft skills such as conflict management, effective communication and problem-solving are necessary to successfully manage workplace noncompliance. Taking a discipline-first approach to noncompliance is counterproductive to building a positive safety culture. Developing and practicing soft skills during times of conflict can help safety managers become more successful in juggling the challenges of noncompliant behavior and improve their efforts to raise the bar to where compliant behavior becomes the norm. **PSJ**

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