

THE SAFETY SPHERE

Using the Right Tools to Influence Workplace Behavior

By Jacob H. Arnow

As the EHS field and its regulations continue to grow, companies have greater incentive than ever to provide effective safety and health training. Safety professionals mitigate risk by not just enforcing rules but influencing behavior.

The right messages delivered in the right way, at the right time and using the right tone can start a wave of change that can positively impact the safety culture of an organization. This article explores how safety professionals can influence workplace behavior using soft skills, training techniques and conflict resolution to master a safety culture where safety is not just enforced, but trumps all.

First Impressions: Sending the Right Message

First impressions are a crucial part of influence, and influence is a foundational pillar of EHS. When people look at a safety professional, they want to see not only someone who ensures that EHS goals are met but also someone who can demonstrate leadership capabilities including hard and soft skills. Soft skills such as being friendly, talking with enthusiasm and smiling make learning more enjoyable for the employees.

A study conducted in 2019 analyzed data from three political parties in the United Kingdom, and the results suggest that whether the candidates smiled or not had a significant effect on how they were perceived during that election

cycle, regardless of their political party (Stewart et al., 2023).

First impressions have a significant effect on participants' level of involvement. When people look at a safety professional, even inadvertently, seeing a smile can make a big difference. Understanding first impressions is crucial not only because they have the potential to create positive change when effectively managed, but because historical context shapes people's perspectives and beliefs.

Solomon Asch (1946), a Polish-American Gestalt psychologist and pioneer in social psychology, conducted a study in 1946 that demonstrated the strength of the relationship between first impressions and memory bias. During the study, Asch asked participants to read from a list of personality traits. The participants were split into two groups, each of which received a different list.

- First list: intelligent, industrious, impulsive, critical, stubborn, envious
- Second list: envious, stubborn, critical, impulsive, industrious, intelligent

Both lists included the same traits; the only difference was that the first list started with positive traits while the second list started with negative ones.

The participants who heard the first list formed much more favorable impressions than the participants who heard the second list.

Asch's study highlights the psychological phenomenon known as the "primacy effect," in which the order of information has a considerable influence based on when and how it is presented. The study further demonstrates that delivering a message the right way contributes to creating the change needed to have a positive safety culture. Impressions and judgments are major contributing factors of how the safety professional is viewed, especially during first impressions.

EHS professionals must maintain extensive technical knowledge across all functions of EHS such as creating detailed standard operating procedures; creating and maintaining lockout/tagout procedures and electrical safety procedures; managing confined spaces; implementing ISO 45001 management system requirements; overseeing powered industrial truck operations; handling propellants and other hazardous materials; conducting industrial hygiene assessments; conducting ergonomic studies; and ensuring correct selection, use, and management of PPE, among many other topics.

With that said, hard skills alone are not nearly enough. Sending the right message by using soft skills such as being friendly, speaking with enthusiasm and smiling makes learning the content more enjoyable for employees who are taking the safety trainings. "Andragogy" is defined as the method and practice of teaching adult learners. Soft skills that can emphasize andragogy are more impactful because they can lead learners to relate much more to the content. Andragogy is an effective way to teach EHS topics because:

- It ensures that employees are focused and engaged in the session.
- Enjoyable learning sessions tend to increase employee morale.
- Employee experiences that are considered favorable are remembered more fondly.

TIPS FOR INFLUENCING WORKPLACE BEHAVIOR

•**Lead with positive first impressions.** Use friendly body language, enthusiasm and a genuine smile to make training sessions more engaging and to set a constructive tone from the start.

•**Deliver messages with intentional framing.** Present key information in a clear, positive order to leverage the primacy effect and help employees form favorable, lasting impressions about expectations.

•**Start training at the right moment.** Address new employees' "why" questions on day one to build trust, eliminate confusion and motivate them to adopt safe work practices early.

•**Connect lessons to real-life scenarios.** Use practical examples—such as when and how to apply lockout/tagout requirements—to show employees how safety standards apply to their daily tasks.

•**Use tone strategically in conflict.** Approach difficult conversations calmly and empathetically, selecting tones e.g., assertive, friendly, informative, that support collaboration and productive problem-solving.

•**Escalate respectfully when needed.** When tone alone is not effective, involve additional stakeholders or teams to broaden perspectives and create stronger, more balanced solutions.



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Teaching at the Right Time

Effective training must be delivered to new employees during their first encounter with the EHS department. This is because questions about why things are done a certain way are natural for adult learners, so it is counterproductive to treat them as a nuisance or an afterthought. It is best to answer these burning questions on day one so employees can feel safe when working on future tasks. Start with the why, and then move onto the how. Answering these questions at the right time motivates employees to gain proficiency and become a model for a positive and proactive safety culture.

Not only is it important for safety questions to be answered, it is imperative that safety training be conducted on day one. The ability for employees to understand and recognize hazards in their workplace and the ways to mitigate them are the foundational building blocks for a successful safety management system.

As an example, when speaking about lockout/tagout, it would be beneficial to talk not only about why lockout/tagout is important, but also how the process keeps people safe. In addition, it would help to discuss specific situations in which the worker may need to look at machine-specific lockout/tagout procedures and know how it can make their job not only easier, but safer as well.

Conflict Resolution in Safety: Setting the Right Tone

Working with many stakeholders can be overwhelming at times, and the role of the safety professional is sometimes even referred to as a thankless job. The safety professional may want to give up at times—these feelings are natural. Safety professionals go above and beyond to keep their workers safe. Sometimes, this means having hard

conversations with employees who may need additional guidance so that they can stay productive and safe.

When dealing with conflict, the safety professional should be calm, collected and ready to collaborate with stakeholders. It is important to escalate situations through the chain of command when necessary, while also acquiring feedback that can be used to make well-rounded and thoughtful decisions. These techniques can help influence others.

Setting the right tone early can help manage this. Tones that can make a situation easier to handle for various parties include being assertive, conversational, friendly, empathetic, informative, playful, inspirational, humorous and professional. If these tones are not effective with the parties involved, respectful escalation methods may be required. This might include creating a bigger team, as getting more heads in the game can create more effective dialogue and perspective.

During a discussion with former Blue Origin CEO Bob Smith, the author asked Smith about the safety profession and his thoughts on dealing with conflict resolution and using the right tone, given his extensive experience with various organizations. He responded:

Think about it for a moment, just listen to what they are saying, even if you don't agree. Don't respond negatively, and then if it's still bothering you, tell your friend or spouse about the issue at the end of the day. They will likely think it's no big deal and help you regain perspective.

Many companies use multiple methods to reward and motivate employees in regard to safety. Besides working with additional stakeholders, positive reinforcement may be met with praise.

During projects, it is important to work with stakeholders by using management of change methodologies and ask the hard questions.

As a safety professional, it is fine to request details while ensuring that the work being done in your realm is compliant with OSHA and keeps employees safe. As the saying goes, "you only know what you know." Communication during the management of change process is vital to a successful business venture, and empathy can go a long way. Management of change methodologies can help the organization, and group dynamics can strengthen the current knowledge base. This sets the right tone for respectful discussions.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, creating change by influencing others is challenging. However, it is a particularly important aspect of EHS. Understanding why and how to use the right messages delivered the right way, at the right time and using the right tone can start a wave of change. Using deliberate communication and leadership allows safety professionals to shape workplace safety, ensuring it is not just a priority, but a requirement. The purpose of a safety team is to provide the tools and resources for others to succeed. By using and giving others the right tools, including our expertise, we can make workplace safety a strategic objective. **PSJ**

References

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Cite this article

Arnow, J.H. (2026, Jan.) The safety sphere: Using the right tools to influence workplace behavior. *Professional Safety*, 71(1), 38-39.