Bursting the bubble of compliance

IIRSM Council member Dan Terry explains how to move on from a culture that values task accomplishment to see the true value in relationship building and reduced injuries and ill health.

I spend much of my working life influencing managers and leaders to create a safer and more productive place. It has long been my belief that this goal can be achieved by health and safety managers, leaders and employees on the techniques, methods, behaviours and attitudes that we associate with safe practice. However, in my role as a safety and health leadership professional, I see – almost on a daily basis – stark examples of poor and unsafe practices and working cultures that don’t appear to have got the message.

This is not to disparage the efforts of health and safety trainers and safety practitioners; it is clear that over the last two decades we have made great progress. Nevertheless, it is equally clear that in many cases this improvement has levelled off. When we see that our efforts can no longer be relied upon to produce sustainable improvements, we must ask ourselves some questions. How do we explain lack of progress? And what can we do differently so that we can engage people in a different and progressive manner?

A different angle

During a conversation with a senior police officer not long after the introduction of speed cameras, I asked for his opinion on how the speed camera contributed to road safety. I will never forget his reply. He said: “Speed cameras create a bubble of compliance”. I found this really interesting. He explained that speed cameras influence driver behaviour, but only in a well-defined bubble stretching about 50 metres before the camera and 100 metres afterwards. When behaviour did change, people only briefly complied with the law and it was only because of the threat of sanction.

So we have a situation where numerous people only change their behaviour when someone is watching. Where health and safety is concerned, many working environments are operating within such obstinate bubbles of compliance. After all, safety is about doing the right thing when no one is looking.

Our challenge then, is what can we do to pop – or at least dramatically expand – the boundaries of that bubble? How can we influence people to move from compliant behaviour to committed behaviour?

The simple answer is better leadership. But this seems to me to be too simplistic. Whilst few would argue with the assertion that leaders play an important role in establishing and sustaining an environment where safe practice can thrive, we also need to recognise that many non-compliant incidents are the result of individual actions based on choices made in the moment, when people are not in the bubble of observation and sanction.

Emotional engagement: leadership

Leadership is the capacity to cause in an engagement a person’s ‘Faith’ in the organisation’s mission and methods. Whereas ‘Belief’ gives people something to hold onto in a crisis the ‘Faith’ instilled by true leadership giving them the moral courage and dedication to let go of any attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that could deter them from their course.

- Does your communicative style of leadership engage or disengage other people’s emotional investment?
- Does it promote emotional security and satisfaction?
- Does it encourage, by demonstration, self-respect and secure feelings of being respected that arise from social and emotional enjoyment?
Worker engagement

Physical engagement: influence

Do you make people feel physically secure about engaging with you in fulfilling the organisation’s mission? How do you know?

Do you use the power of your position in the organisation (legitimately) to encourage, or illegitimately, to cause fear, in others?

Are the environmental contexts of the organisation, such as workplaces, access, security, welfare, ergonomics, etc, engagingly uplifting or disengagingly depressing? The conditions of these contextual boundaries are important aspects of your securing a person’s physical engagement.

What lies beneath

Think back to the speed camera example and analyse your own driving behaviour. Does your right foot automatically stray towards the brake pedal when you see a camera? Does your right foot quickly move back to the accelerator as soon as you see the camera diminishing in your rear-view mirror? If you answered yes, you are operating in a bubble of compliance.

We all know the law and we also know the potential consequences of speed and unsafe driving, but this is only brought to the front of our consciousness when we are inside the ‘bubble’ we created by our own behaviour because we are committed to safe driving – we comply with the law only when we are being watched.

Individuals make choices in the moment and what is in the front of our minds at that moment will influence the choices we make.

At the end of the day, behaviour comes from what we see or witness. But it’s what lies beneath the surface that we need to work on in many organisations. Our behaviour is constantly being influenced by internal and external stimuli. It is estimated that we have about 60,000 thoughts a day – around 95% of them we have the very next day. We are creatures of habit, which can be useful at times but not at other.

Reinventing the way we do things

The world is changing and we have to move with the times – regulations and procedures have their place but we need to go further to engage staff members’ hearts and minds, to really engage them. So what can leaders do to increase the likelihood that safety and health is at the front of workers’ minds when we make choices ‘in the moment’?

By adopting a few simple practices, you will go some way to popping the bubble and engendering a committed approach rather than compliant behaviour.

We must endeavour to be more relationship focused and engage with all staff at all levels. The main challenge is to move on from a culture that values task accomplishment to see the true value in relationship building and reduced incident and ill health. This might involve drawing a line in the sand and holding an informal meeting of what needs to happen – what you want to happen, and attempting to break down the attitudes of the past.

Many people think that if something has always been a certain way it’ll never change – particularly senior management – but good behaviour is an indicator of good engagement. It is not about being soft as a leader, it’s about going the extra mile and learning what makes people tick, through building rapport and building trust. The building of trust within your teams is at the heart of any cultural change journey. After all, if you go about changing what’s below the surface, this will then potentially change what’s visible – the behaviour.

People need to feel that they are in proportionate control of their development with less one-upmanship positive peer pressure.

Transformative engagement and the invisible leader

The next time you are tempted to react negatively to a particular situation, event or remark, stop and consider if there is a better way to respond. The attitude we use to respond will ultimately determine how our character is built. The question isn’t how can we implement more procedures to get people to be compliant, but rather how can we support the teams we have in finding the best solutions and be more committed?

How can we strengthen the possibilities of the various team members so that they need the least amount of direction-setting from above?

Generally speaking, people will engage in something they believe gives meaning to their lives; the stronger the sense of meaning the greater the personal stake in the engagement. What gives meaning is personal authority over one’s future and a secure sense of belonging: fellowship, contribution, personal significance and self-value. Recognition of one’s unique individuality being valued by others and pride in one’s skills and their invaluable contribution to the organisation’s mission.

Instilling personal pride in promoting a sense of partnership in an enterprise is emotional engagement.

So moving from compliance to commitment is an essential process for senior managers, managers, leaders and personnel in all organisations for a sustainable future especially in our fast-paced ever changing work environment, let’s burst the bubble once and for all.

What mistakes do companies make the most when managing their employees?

28% cited a lack of recognition and praise

41% cited a lack of communication between staff and management

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