

The Psychology of Safety

Paul Hooper, DC, MPH, MS

For years I have considered the psychosocial aspects of work injuries, and especially the resulting disabilities, to be extremely important. So when I saw the, *The Psychology of Safety*, I was naturally interested. Written by Dr. E. Scott Geller, a psychology professor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, the book lends a most interesting, and somewhat different approach to the topic of injury prevention.

Geller writes that the most successful approaches to occupational safety directly address the human aspects of safety. He describes, albeit somewhat optimistically, a "Total Safety Culture," in which:

- everyone feels responsible about safety and does something about it on a daily basis;
- people go beyond the call of duty to identify unsafe conditions and at risk behaviors, and they intervene to correct them;
- safe work practices are supported with rewarding feedback;
- people "actively care" for the safety of themselves and others;
- safety is not considered a priority that can be shifted depending on the demands of the situation.

Obviously, this is much easier said than done. According to Geller, it requires "continual attention to three domains." First, attention must be directed to a variety of environmental factors: equipment, tools, physical layout of the job, procedures, and standards. This is one of the most common approaches to worksite safety matters. Second, person factors must be addressed. These include attitudes, beliefs, and personalities. As clinicians, we know only too well how important these factors are in enabling patients to recover. Third, Geller notes that behavioral factors must be included in any safety program. These behavioral factors include safe and at-risk work practices, but Geller continually stresses the practice of having employees and supervisors go out of their way to intervene on behalf of another's safety.

Geller refers to a series of paradigm shifts for total safety. He describes the traditional methods of safety management; 1) engineering (designing the safest work place); education (teaching workers how to safely exist in their work environment); and enforcement (using discipline to enforce compliance). He states that these traditional three "E's" have only gotten us so far and, to take safety and injury prevention to the next level, three additional "E's" must be added; empowerment,

ergonomics, and evaluation.

Perhaps most important is empowerment. In the past, some supervisors have interpreted "enforcement" to mean a strict disciplinary approach to enforcing safe work practices. The resulting adversarial relationship between workers and supervisors has been counterproductive and the ill will created has turned off many workers. These individuals may do what is required, but no more. Others may actually try to beat the safety systems and even sabotage the regulatory practices. Rather than enforcing safe work practices through a strict punishment approach, Geller recommends encouraging safe work practices and rewarding those for protecting themselves and others. Such a positive approach has a great deal of merit.

Geller provides 10 paradigm shifts:

1. From OSHA regulations to corporate responsibility -- Rather than doing "safety stuff" because government regulations require it, encouraging workers to achieve their own self-initiated goals.
2. From failure oriented to achievement oriented -- Most safety programs keep a record of safety failures. In contrast, safety and productivity records are stated in achievement terms.
3. From outcome focused to behavior focused -- Companies as well as individuals are rewarded for outcomes, consequently attention is focused on outcomes. Geller suggests a scoring system based on what people do for safety.
4. From top-down control to bottom-up involvement -- It is the people on-the-line who know where the safety problems are. Given a chance and appropriate encouragement, they can have the most influence on safe behaviors and at correcting at-risk behaviors and practices.
5. From rugged individualism to teamwork -- Safety requires the kind of team approach that companies use for quality and production.
6. From a piecemeal to a systems approach -- Any long-term improvements can only be achieved by attention to all aspects of the corporate culture.
7. From fault finding to fact finding -- An injury or near injury provides an opportunity to investigate facts from all aspects of the system that could have contributed to the incident.
8. From reactive to proactive -- Investigating the events that preceded an accident.
9. From quick fix to continuous improvement -- There is no quick fix for most injury prevention programs. Significant change can only be achieved by a commitment by every individual and every level.

10. From priority to value -- Rather than using slogans such as, "Safety is a priority," it should be an enduring value. Safe work practices should occur regardless of the demands of a particular day. Safe work should be the enduring norm.

Geller states: "Safety should be more than the behaviors of 'using personal equipment,' more than 'locking out power' and checking equipment for potential hazards,' and more than 'practicing good housekeeping.' Safety should be an unwritten rule, a social norm, that workers follow regardless of the situation. It should become a value that is never questioned -- never compromised."

In the words of Siskel and Ebert, two thumbs up to *The Psychology of Safety* by E. Scott Geller. I haven't done a book report since high school, but this book gave me a great deal of information. I highly recommend it for anyone interested in injury prevention and safety on-the-job. *The Psychology of Safety* is published by Chilton Book Company, Radnor, Pennsylvania, 1996 (ISBN 0-9019-8733-4). The approximate price is \$80.00.

If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the forms that we use in our industrial evaluations, please send a stamped (85 cents), self-addressed manilla envelope (10 X 13) to Dr. Paul D. Hooper, Injury Prevention Technologies, 2562 Castle Rock Road, Diamond Bar, CA 91785.

I may also be contacted at Los Angeles College of Chiropractic, 16200 East Amber Valley Drive, Whittier, CA 90609. If you have questions, you may reach me at (909) 598-6344 or at HoopPD@aol.com.

Paul Hooper, DC
Diamond Bar, California

NOVEMBER 1996