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Essential Elements of Effective Health and Safety Training in the Workplace

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With the right approach, health and safety training in the workplace can be the driver of long-term cultural change. The key is being clear from the earliest stages about the desired outcome, choosing the appropriate tools and fully engaging the workforce.

Workplace Safety Is a Universal Goal

Industry, and especially high hazard sectors such as oil and gas, nuclear, mining or construction, contends daily with the challenges of keeping workers safe and healthy as well as assets intact and operating smoothly. Both Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) training and workshops related to process safety have been developed as a means of addressing those challenges and reducing the rate of incidents.

To be effective, safety training programmes need to be designed keeping their desired outcome in mind: transforming company culture in ways that result in a consistently safer workplace. This overarching goal requires companies to examine and adjust attitudes, behaviour, decision making and interaction with the asset, equipment, processes, procedures and polices, and each other. It is a complex undertaking, one that is most successful when consciously and deliberately planned and carried out according to a set of organising principles and by strengthening learner engagement at every opportunity.

Effective Safety Training Starts With a Close Look at Safety Culture

The starting point for any successful safety intervention is understanding what currently defines the company's safety culture. This might mean a cultural assessment such as the **Culture of Care Diagnostic**, which involves leadership interviews, workforce surveys, observations, audits and focus groups to establish a profile, captured in a written report, of the company's safety culture. Another effective approach is close collaboration with a consultancy that asks probing questions: What has triggered heightened attention on safety in the organisation? What are the major worries and concerns when it comes to safety? This type of questioning, focusing on the perspectives of members within the organisation, reveals much about its safety culture without the structure of a formal assessment. No matter the scope of the intervention, being able to incorporate the company's current processes, procedures and tools allows learners to relate more readily to content and to integrate new knowledge into an existing framework.

The Principle of Engagement

Creating a safer work environment requires the full participation of employees and contractors at every level, and the first step in this direction is to spark engagement. Unfortunately, safety training is often classified - at least in peoples' minds - with legalities and compliance with the law. However, it is wise to choose a language that better reflects the heart of the matter, which, simply put, is care.
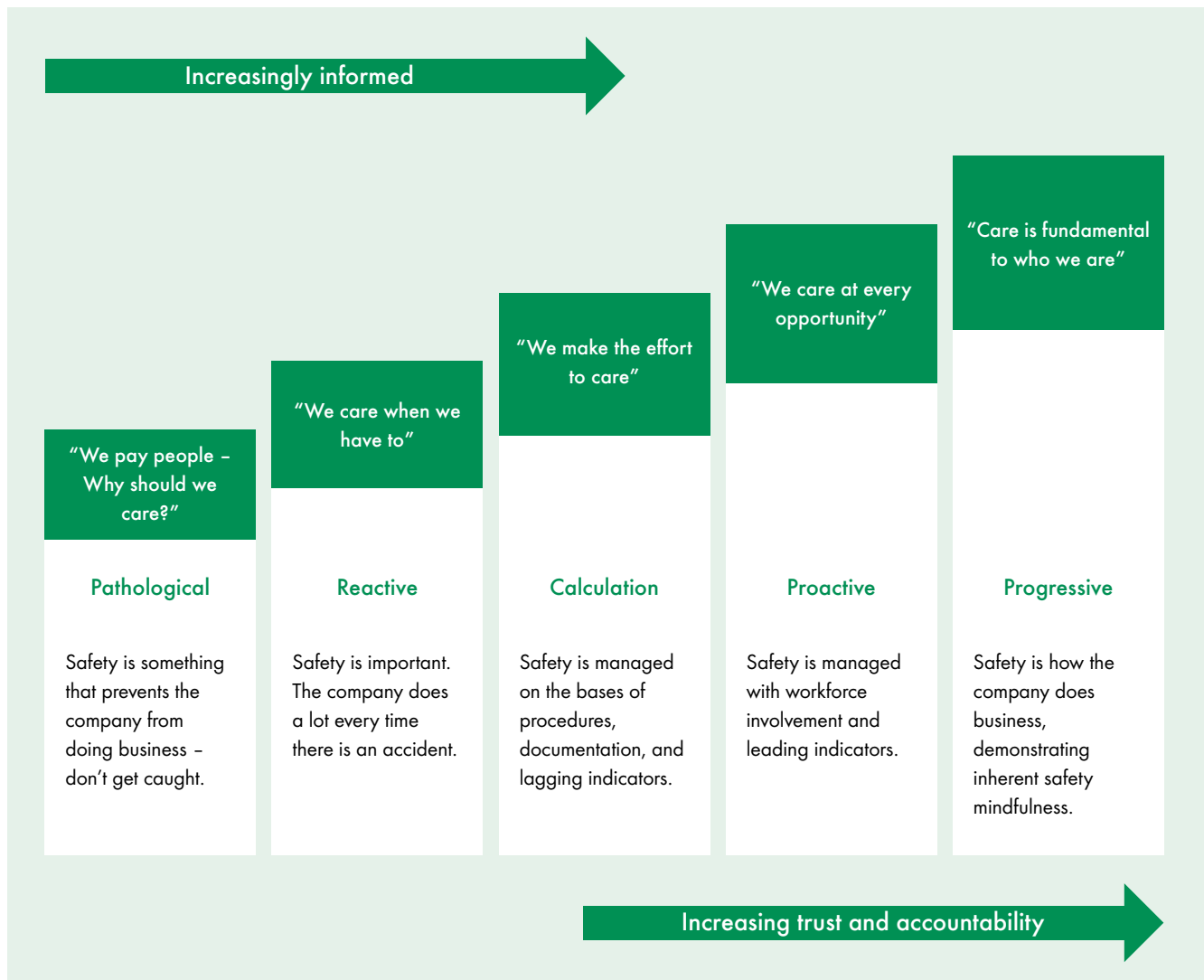
The principle of care reminds us that what we care for as human beings is what we pay attention to and what we demonstrate concern for. When we focus the conversation on care, rather than on safety, we find that the topic broadens in helpful ways. Care is a concept that every human can relate to, regardless of culture, language or nationality. It is not an idea confined to the world of work. On the contrary, care is more often associated with personal relationships, and introducing it into a work context allows people to see their workplace with new eyes.

Paying attention and demonstrating concern is effective way of improving a safety culture. Attention is needed to become aware of hazards and to reliably notice and identify them. The next step is determining the best way to show concern - how can the hazards be eliminated or controlled? Using care as the organising principle for approaching safety results in an engaging and effective reframing of the issue. It leads to more proactive as opposed to reactive behaviours, as individuals become alert to the potential dangers around them and actively seek to reduce their presence and effects.

Self-Reflection and Tracking Progress

Cultural change is not as easy to measure quantitatively as other modifications that take place in industrial settings. However, the **Cultural Maturity Ladder** conceived by Professor Patrick Hudson is a useful tool for discussing an organisation's level of safety in terms of culture. The ladder includes five classifications, each of which describes a level of cultural maturity. Organisations at the highest level display the greatest awareness by demonstrating "chronic unease", having knowledge and understanding of hazards, but also the barriers designed to eliminate, mitigate or control them, and showing concern about the behaviours that respond if these barriers are compromised or ineffective. In a training setting, delegates can use the ladder to recognise their own company's stage of cultural development as well as to discuss ways of advancing.

Increasingly informed →

"We pay people – Why should we care?"	"We care when we have to"	"We make the effort to care"	"We care at every opportunity"	"Care is fundamental to who we are"
Pathological	**Reactive**	**Calculation**	**Proactive**	**Progressive**
Safety is something that prevents the company from doing business – don't get caught.	Safety is important. The company does a lot every time there is an accident.	Safety is managed on the bases of procedures, documentation, and lagging indicators.	Safety is managed with workforce involvement and leading indicators.	Safety is how the company does business, demonstrating inherent safety mindfulness.

Increasing trust and accountability →

The **Awareness-To-Advocacy** Model is a similar tool applicable more to individuals rather than the company as a whole. It identifies six stages that characterise workforce development when it comes to safe behaviour: no awareness, awareness, understanding, belief, role model and advocacy. As workers move from simple awareness of what constitutes safe behaviour towards advocacy, they become convinced that their actions make a difference and ultimately become safety role models. The rather static knowledge of the difference between dangerous and safe behaviour transforms into a more dynamic experience where behaviours are applied to new skills, decision-making and communication.

Awareness   **Belief**   **Advocate**

No Awareness   **Understand**   **Role Model**
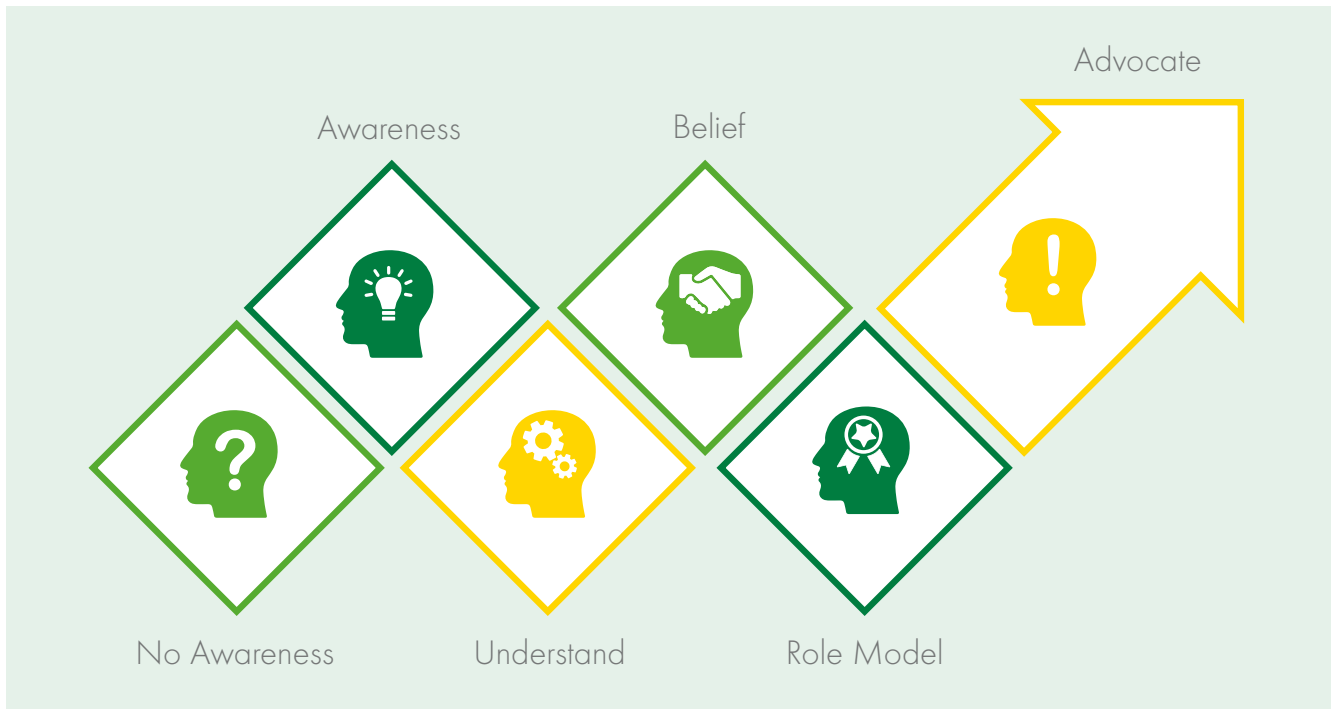
Customised Content and Interactive Instruction

While the content of workplace health and safety training depends on the needs and goals of the company in question, there are some generally applicable concepts. For example, risk perception is an important topic because it touches on the human tendency to normalise their environments and hazards within them, and an altered perception of risk through over-familiarisation with their working environments and activities. As long as no ill effects are felt, situations that are less than ideal from a safety standpoint are normalised and tolerated. Habits form, and real risk is no longer perceived as such. Training that aims at changing behaviours has to lay bare these risks and habits and find ways to motivate workers to alter comfortable patterns. **Training for top leadership**, managers and supervisors often focuses on developing emotional intelligence or might draw on Bill George's Authentic Leadership model. The latter emphasises how effective leaders inspire followers based on who they are - their values, integrity, admirable qualities - rather than what they are, i.e. their job title or position.

While the content must be well-structured and appropriate, its delivery is decisive. Instruction that does not engage learners is doomed to fail. Following the principles of Accelerated Learning as developed by Colin Rose can help. This means exploiting every opportunity to support participants as they absorb and apply new information, bridging the gap between the classroom and the workplace. One way to do this is to integrate actual procedures and processes used by the company into the seminars. Another way is to make learning as experiential as possible. An activity might require participants to solve a problem or perform a task working as a group. Storytelling could figure prominently, so that learners contribute their own experiences to the conversation. A variety of methods for acquiring and embedding information must be made available in order to address the diverse learning styles of a workplace population.

Ensuring Long-Term Change

Even when safety training is well-designed, suitable for its audience, engaging and inspiring, if it stops when delegates leave the classroom it may not have a lasting impact. This is because overcoming habitual patterns in human behaviour is extremely challenging. And, since shared behaviour is one of the building blocks of a company's culture, transforming the culture means changing the behaviour. If a workshop leaves delegates motivated to change and equips them with the tools to do so, it has advanced the cause of safety. The best way to keep that momentum moving forward is to follow up with on-the-job interventions such as **behavioural coaching** for individuals or groups that help reinforce what's been learned. Without a strong commitment to ensuring that employees are accurately applying new skills to their activities and decision-making, the pressures of a dynamic, productivity-oriented organisation can threaten to undo progress made towards a sustainably safer work environment.

PAULA PATERSON

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DEKRA Organisational Reliability

DEKRA Organisational Reliability is a behavioural change consultancy. Working in collaboration with our clients, our approach is to influence the safety culture with the aim of 'making a difference´. We deliver the skills, methods, and motivation to change leadership attitudes, behaviours and decision-making among employees. Measurable sustainable improvement of safety outcomes is our goal. We are a service unit of DEKRA SE, a global leader in safety since 1925 with over 39,000 employees in 50 countries.

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