With all the promised miraculous results, how can leaders actually achieve remarkable improvements? How does one go beyond trends to build solid, growing results? Ultimately, improving skills is the bottom line to accelerate human performance in safety and in everything else.

Many leaders equate skills with motivation. While both are important, the biggest difference is that even the strongest motivation (i.e., what a person wants to do) will not raise and sustain accomplishments by itself. Wanting, wishing or hoping can only take you so far. Without the necessary skills to support them, these mental attributes are similar to a flywheel spinning without engaging a car’s wheels; the motor may rev but the vehicle will not move.

In contrast, skills underlie what someone can do. Specifically, elevating decisions and actions requires acquiring and using new or upgraded skills until they become second nature. This is the case for nearly every important activity, from presenting to groups to leading safety investigations. This prepares the vehicle to move. For example, learning to recognize what is needed for learning new skills requires acquiring and using new or upgraded skills within their companies. This is not only partially effective methods and results in loss

1) The organization expects instant change from lifelong default habits.
   - Leaders provide information or demonstrate skills in one exposure. This does not allow adequate time for workers to grasp and try new methods.
   - Leaders only tell people what they should be doing better without trying new methods for themselves.
   - Leaders assume that workers can mimic skills with ease as portrayed or demonstrated in a video or on a poster.
   - Leaders assume that online training courses for development will actually impart physical skill acquisition.
   - Leaders expect skills to become infused by partnering an employee with a more adept coworker. This can deteriorate into a school-of-hard-knocks experience and can sometimes make things worse. In some cases, even adept workers may not be conscious of what actions or traits actually make them effective, so they are unable to pass their skills along.

2) The organization enlists motivational approaches that attempt to change willingness to work safely without offering better alternative actions (e.g., lift safely, think before you act).

3) Management monitors whether workers are using skills (that they have not yet mastered) but does not impart new and needed skills.

4) Management reprimands employees for not working more efficiently and safely, yet it does not specifically identify what workers should do differently. This limited leadership approach implies that discipline trumps learning. Ironically, this activity typically backfires because workers do not want to appear incompetent, so they likely will not try better methods.

5) Those who cannot effectively use skills or who merely go through the motions teach others. This approach can be confusing, impart only partially effective methods and result in loss

of leadership credibility. This is critical. Craig Lewis says employees call his leadership style effective because workers believe that leadership is behind what it says and does, and does “not just sell snake oil.”

6) Management does not make practical applications of new skills toward what makes a difference for workers. Skills learned in a vacuum are not as impactful and, therefore, not as eagerly adopted as skills that are applied to help make a task easier.

7) Management attempts to transfer complicated methods simultaneously. It is better to initiate bite-sized pieces of new skills that employees can readily assimilate with an eye toward adding more details and applications later as people become accustomed to them. Generally, the more difficult a new skill is to learn, the less likely people will do it.

Charlie Braxton says, “Simple does not mean easy.” For instance, at least seven skills coordinate into safer and more effective lifting, but people must learn and understand each one at a time so they are not overwhelmed.

8) The employer expects everyone to perform a skill the same way. Personal injury prevention (as opposed to prescribed process safety procedures) works best when people learn to make minor adaptations for their own conditions (e.g., physical limitations, size, gender).

9) Management only reinforces existing actions, which assumes that workers have access to the skills needed to work safely but are just not employing them.

The Skillful Seven: Proven Methods to Develop Higher-Level Safety Skills

To achieve remarkable results, leaders must go beyond safety and approach skill acquisition differently to select the right skills, transfer them the best ways, then encourage those skills to become absorbed and replicated. Workers must practice the skills to internalize them.

One proven approach is to have people become self-motivated to utilize the skills as much as possible, then to increasingly incorporate new skills into as many tasks as possible (both at work and at home) so they grow into safer actions, then into trailing indicators.

Seven key principles will help transfer skills that will blossom into high-level safety performance.

1) Activate, do not just motivate. “Activation is energy exchange, not just knowledge pass-through and more than just motivation,” Lewis says. It is initially critical to get employees’ attention. This requires thinking like them, not expecting workers to think like safety professionals.

To improve workers’ receptivity:
- Relate personal benefits to their learning and use of new skills. This has to go well beyond, “So you won’t get hurt,” to positive results they want. Each individual has to see the value of the new methods.
- Show, do not just tell, workers what you want them to develop expertise in. Leaders should explain and demonstrate the skills they are asking workers to master.
- Honor and respect workers’ experience and knowledge. They are not blank slates. Leaders must understand what workers do and know how to foster a connection with them. Ask workers to consider and bring up applications. Invite criticism and difficult questions, and honestly respond without trying to double-talk or shut them down. Give them opportunities to experiment and figure out for themselves what works and what does not.
- Ask workers to try new methods, but do not rush them to change. This breaks the inertia of them doing things the same old way and, ironically, gives them time to become accustomed to new skills and greatly accelerates buy-in. Employ as much hands-on experience as possible. The more practical ways they are able to try out new methods, the more likely they will take these on.
- Make it easy to learn. Martial arts master Hung Chow used to say that if a student had difficulty learning a new technique, he would cut it in half until it was easy for the learner to do it. McClellan says, “The body and the brain work at different speeds. Thinking you understand a concept is not the same as actually being able to apply it. Help people see this lag to understand they may have skills only to a certain degree and encourage them to keep practicing.”
- Energize workers through exploration and discovery. Help them experience, then notice any aha moments, even the small moments of clarity and accomplishment.

2) Personalize the methods. Go beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Have workers try different variations on a theme. And, as noted, wherever possible allow and encourage workers to tweak methods so that the approach works best for their individual characteristics. This might include adapting to left-handed employees; finding ways to accommodate weakness or injury in certain parts of the body; or adapting to gender differences or personal preferences. Catalog these, ask employees what they have done to modify new skills to best make these work for them, then share with others.

3) Ground new skills in daily applications both at work and at home (where possible). Demonstrate how practical and helpful these skills can be.

4) Encourage practice in noncritical situations. Taking any skill to a higher level requires practice. Avoid forcing practice or doing this so repetitively that people become bored. Over the years, I have practiced many martial arts defenses thousands of times or more but never exactly the same way.
Changing things even slightly builds mindful reflexes; it is based on realizing that even two seemingly similar situations are never exactly the same and must be adjusted in slightly different ways.

The measure of improvement is not just the number of times a person practices, it is how many times s/he tries new skills with full attention and thinks how to make slight adjustments. “A little bit of real awareness goes a long way,” Braxton says. Keep in mind that aha moments only spring out of focused attention.

This attentive practice makes for self-reinforcement whereby people experience their own sense of improvement, rather than just waiting for feedback from others (that may never come).

Skills are only acquired when they become ingrained through repeatedly using methods in slightly different ways and situations in which the mind controls action and reaction but without overthinking. While this may sound complicated, reflect on skills that you have acquired, then determine whether it makes sense.

5) Promote identification for reinforcement. Look for examples (observed or through interview) of some workers using new skills for stronger results, and use these as models. Seeing and hearing of peers valuing, practicing and applying new skills carries a lot of reinforcement power. Invite workers to talk about their experiences with new skills. Elicit and share testimonials about improved effectiveness.

6) Position skills for continuous improvement. Continuing to improve any skill can generate a significant amount of satisfaction. Remind people that they can always reach another higher level, just as in the martial arts in which first-degree black belt is just a start but by no means the ultimate level of expertise. Ask workers what they have personally learned about moving up to higher skill levels, either at the job or in their personal lives.

7) Check in with workers periodically about how they are using new skills, what modifications they might have made, results they have experienced and if they have any questions. Repeat critical themes without boring them. The more immediately workers see actual benefits from new skills, the more likely they will continue to deepen these. One-on-one follow-up does not have to take long but it can greatly reinforce using new skills.

**Conclusion**

Acquiring new skills or considerably elevating existing ones is founded on experience and building a new groove, not just expecting workers to memorize a checklist or safe practice. While expertise is not gained overnight, the process of skill development is what ultimately boosts safety performance and culture to the highest possible levels and sustains them as well.

---

**COUPON CODES**

SAVE $50
Enroll in a Course by November 30th
Use Code: CONNECT11