

## PS Asks

# David Frances

### **PS: What inspired you to write your book, *This Is a Safety Moment!*?**

**David:** I own an employee assistance program (EAP) company, and for more than 30 years I have been involved with work organizations as an EAP provider, consultant, trainer and executive coach. Two years ago, a client company asked me if I could develop a program to help employees give feedback in a way that wouldn't generate bad blood to coworkers who behave unsafely. So, I did. Afterward, unbeknownst to me, the site manager sent the program to corporate, and I've been teaching the techniques all over the country ever since. The book was a natural outgrowth of this training. It enables me to expand on the content in a way that I can't in a typical hour and a half training program.

### **PS: What did you learn after writing the book?**

**David:** Through feedback I've received about the book and from audiences, I've learned that employees are very receptive to this material for reasons beyond the workplace. They see that these techniques can be equally effective for giving feedback at home, as well as at work. Trainees are unusually attentive because they understand that this material can improve their abilities to deal with potential conflict in any context.

### **PS: In your experience, what is the most effective technique when confronting coworkers about safety?**

**David:** Starting the conversation with a nonthreatening phrase like, "This is a safety moment!" can be effective. The reason I like it so much is that it is usually greeted with a laugh or a smile, which is the best way to start a conversation where you're criticizing someone's behavior.

People tend to laugh at this opening because it's so stilted and unnatural. It might be natural for Einstein if he were on the factory floor, pointing an index finger to the sky while intoning, "This is a safety moment!" But for everyone else, it's so incongruous that it's funny. Of course, this or any other opening phrase has to be delivered in a friendly, nonpatronizing tone for it to have the desired effect.

### **PS: Do you really think that peer feedback can become as routine as, say, morning coffee?**

**David:** Sure. I think that "This is a safety moment!" can become as common a workplace convention as saying, "How're you doing?" when you pass someone in the hall or holding open a door for someone walking just behind you. Everybody knows that talking about safety, whenever it's warranted, is the right thing to do. By training people to give feedback respectfully, you make it easier for them to do so.

### **PS: If it is the right thing to do, why do employees have problems giving feedback to colleagues who are doing something unsafely?**

**David:** Employees' own thoughts get in the way of their doing the right thing. Various common worries exist that interfere with their willingness to talk about safety: Will the person on the receiving end be angry or defensive? Will critical feedback sour the relationship? Will it generate unnecessary conflict? Will the recipient carry a grudge? These may be reasonable concerns if the feedback is not offered respectfully. This means that the feedback is strictly observational. It also may include statements about the potential impact of the behavior, as well as "I" statements.

In addition, respectful feedback is necessarily devoid of name-calling, eye rolls, condescending tone or anything else that puts people down. If you provide feedback that is descriptive and that doesn't contain a hint of personal put-down, the answer to all of these worries will be "no" because the recipient will have no reason to be personally offended.

### **PS: What can employers do to help people overcome such worries?**

**David:** It's not just a cliché to say that safety is everyone's job. Employers must continually reinforce this message and that includes urging employees to call coworkers on unsafe behavior whenever they see it. It's just not good enough to ignore safety breaches when you observe them. Because nobody else may see such a breach, it's a coworker's responsibility to say something; otherwise, the risk of a preventable accident or injury remains.

Employees want to do the right thing. They're just unsure about how to do it without making things worse. When they understand how to give feedback respectfully, they can fight the self-generated reasons why not to say something with reasons to say something. Employers can do their part by training employees to give feedback respectfully.

### **PS: Can people really learn to change their thinking?**

**David:** Absolutely. People do it all the time, especially when it's mandated by their jobs. Whenever you start a new job, for example, the conventions of your new workplace quickly compel you to update your thoughts. These include adapting to a new commute, new work hours, new colleagues and a new manager's expectations. What may have been acceptable at the old job may not be so at the new one. All of these changes can only occur when your thinking changes. Any workplace that requires its people to take responsibility for maintaining safe behavior is implicitly requiring them to change their thinking accordingly.

### **PS: Part of your training services includes sessions where participants can practice feedback skills. Can you give an example of an activity participants would engage in?**

**David:** First, I ask for a volunteer to play the part of a difficult person, someone you would typically avoid rather than engage. Then, we role-play a safety feedback conversation where I demonstrate how to give feedback respectfully to such a resistant person. Following this demo, I break the groups up into threes for individual role-play skill practice.

**David Frances, Ph.D.**, is vice president of training and development for Quadrant Health Strategies Inc., a leading provider of occupational health services nationwide. Formerly CEO of EAP Systems, David has provided training and consulting for a wide range of organizations, including the National Football League, Pfizer, Symantec and W.R. Grace.