

Anchoring Skills into Daily Actions

To move to global-class safety performance and culture, it's critical to apply high-level anchoring for reinforcement and ongoing improvement.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Dec 01, 2010

Once is not enough when it comes to assimilating fresh info and new skills into changed actions. Experience is clear -- a single exposure rarely sets new skills. In fact, I've found "the first is often the worst." Multiple effective exposures are necessary for working out the kinks with newly acquired methods.

For example, a single golf lesson with Ernie Els (or similar world-class athlete) is unlikely to improve your game as much as 10 with a local club pro. And Ernie's one-and-done will likely cost a lot more (of course, this does give you bragging rights). Even better? Multiple lessons with a local pro interspersed with numerous practices on your own.

It's also important to remember this principle when transmitting expectations of improvement. Once upon a time, we applied the terms "Trainers" or "Instructors" to those workers (of clients) we prepared to deliver our MoveSMART® interventions. But we saw these titles limited their expectations to just presenting, then job done. So we now call these agents of change "Instructor-Catalysts" with three understood levels of responsibility. Initially, they pass along mental strategies and physical prevention techniques (in this case, for preventing strains/sprains, slips/trips/falls, or hand injuries). Then they coach to answer questions and make specific worksite applications. Third, they focus on site approaches for sustaining and expanding daily use of methods and techniques.

In my experience, most of us tend to employ features of habit. "Reinforcement" is no exception. In fact, most companies default toward applying the same approaches:

- celebrations, such as yearly events
- awards/incentives
- external monitoring
- reminders - which can be *personal* (clothing, awards), *visual* (posters, slogans), or *organizational* (campaigns, promotions)
- getting supervisors involved asking about safe actions
- formal refreshers and coaching

While all of these have value, they're usually not enough to solidify newly offered methods into daily actions.

Alternatively, there's the negative, "big stick" stuff: writeups, discipline, forced days off, planned embarrassment, firing, and more. These "punishing" strategies often result in workers going undercover, hiding near-misses, not reporting, shifting focus away from themselves (and what really occurred). All of which get in the way of elevating individual safe judgment and actions.

Characteristics of 'Validating' Contacts

We've found the best approach for setting newly exposed skills into actions is to have: a) a large number of b) validating contacts. You've likely heard statements that it requires so many thousands of exposures to learn a new skill. Numerous contacts set a pattern, create default actions, build an automatic pilot program. But the quality of contacts is also critical to actual change. Here are characteristics of "validating" contacts:

- *for maximum receptivity* -- are well timed (e.g., to avoid a recurrence right after a close call, mentally rehearsing the safest way to accomplish a task).
- *for self-motivation* -- offer benefits that interest the user rather than solely push prevention. For example, rather than reminding people how to use stride techniques in inclement weather so they don't slip and get hurt, instead focus on how these methods can boost their balance, strength, and surefootedness when doing anything important to them (fishing, hiking, etc.). And that by practicing methods at work, they can improve their performance everywhere.
- *for energized acquisition* -- build in discovery. Ask open-ended questions to spur thinking and problem-solving, rather than just tell them to "act safe." To maximize energy and buy-in, design reinforcements to be kinesthetic and participative; help them try and experience rather than passively listen. Also, carve out small time pockets for practicing new skills with minimal get-it-done pressures.
- *for best application* -- are individualized to a person's actual need for the skill (not a generic poster, nor a picture of person lying hurt at bottom of stairs).
- *for ongoing adjustment* -- emphasize self-monitoring. This can be done many ways, such as directed questions. ("Where do you most feel forces in your body when pushing?" or "In which of these two positions do you feel less tension in your lower back?")
- *for maximizing personal satisfaction* -- help them see themselves as successful, making a positive difference. People tend to continue doing activities in which they experience success.

- *for best external support when watching and offering feedback* -- "prefer conversation to observation," in the words of expert change agent Paul McClellan.
- *for promoting higher-level organizational safety culture* -- coordinate reinforcement into a surround system where others (peers, peer-catalysts, managers, executives) remind, watch for positive applications (seeking out and recognizing successful "safety heroes") and communicate back successes organization-wide.

It's definitely important to make a strong first impression when introducing new knowledge and skills. But to move to global-class safety performance and culture, it's as critical to apply high-level anchoring for reinforcement and ongoing improvement.

About the Author

Robert Pater is Managing Director of Strategic Safety Associates and MoveSMART®. To contact him, email rpater@movesmart.com.

Copyright 1996-2013 1105 Media Inc. All rights reserved.