
Discovering Safety: Why Participation Does Not Equal Engagement

Solely broadcasting "shoulds" and "have-tos" quashes energy and internal motivation.

By [Robert Pater](#) | Oct 01, 2016

Humans are explorers by nature. There's something that comes alive when we discover something new, even if that's only for ourselves. You don't have to be the first human to find new land or unearth a previously unknown species. It may just mean discovering something for yourself—being the first among a circle of friends or family to try out an excellent hole-in-the-wall restaurant, come across an obscure but riveting TV show, or locate a gem camping spot.

Think about a time the ripple of thrill in discovery energized you. It can awake us from our daily repetitive patterns of work and communications and motivate us to share what we've found with others to excite them with new possibilities. On the other side, "typical" Safety goes another direction, rarely enlisting the energy of discovery. In fact, Safety is typically based on prescribing, "This is what you should think. Here's what you have to remember. This is exactly what you must do. Or else _____" (fill in the blank with: a. death, b. dire physical consequence, c. terrible repercussions on your family, d. getting in trouble/disciplined/fired).

This approach—seemingly necessary in the eyes of many—basically goes against that part of human nature that is sparked by "Aha" moments. Solely broadcasting "shoulds" and "have-tos" quashes energy and internal motivation.

Now, of course there have to be firm, bottom-line Safety procedures to prevent limb- or lung- or life-threatening events. Just keep these to the necessary minimum. Don't make all communications, policies, and procedures so rigidly dictated that there isn't room or time for people to try out and find their own best methods for themselves. Wherever possible, let them discover and select from among several

safe alternatives.

Trying to spoonfeed Safety may lead to bare-minimum performance but will never propel a company to high-level leading and trailing accomplishments; to achieve that level, workers have to be able to think for themselves and make adjustments to new or changing conditions.

There are 4 things you *can* draw from right now to promote discovery:

1. *Move toward active engagement beyond expecting "participation."* Participating just entails barely more than being a passive listener or asleep with eyes open. We've seen leaders call on people, try to force them to respond in groups, assign them to committees, otherwise "volunteer them" to do something in Safety. While this may count as a participation check-off, you can lead a person to the dinner table but you can't make them eat—and you certainly can't make them enjoy the food. On the other hand, engagement means "Yes! I'm in!" Leaders can further encourage this by inviting and listening more and telling less. Go well beyond the motions, where they have a real choice to become active, default to asking rather than making them engage.
2. *Promote Eureka moments.* For real and lasting change, one "Aha!" is worth a multitude of "Shoulds" or "You have to's." "Eureka" literally means, "I've found it!" (in Greek.) These moments spring out of energizing people, usually through enlisting discovery, where they get to try on new PPE, a training method or tool, and find for themselves how well it works, whether it's an upgrade or downgrade from what they've previously been doing. You can help them look for these realization opportunities through questions that guide their attention (one we frequently use in our MoveSMART® process is, "Do you notice any difference in the level of tension in your lower back when you use this technique?") and by offering exciting new ways rather than just rehashing same-old methods.
3. *Offer principles rather than only conveying specific practices.* Think of Safety communications as part of advanced Explorer School, helping people understand "whys," not just "whats," they must adhere to. The more someone understands what underlies best Safety practices and what's in it for them to consider these (beyond not getting hurt or in trouble), the more likely he'll be able to find a range of acceptable ways for doing different tasks. For example, rather than just telling someone *how* to adjust an "ergonomic" chair, help her understand the *whys* (to elevate energy and alertness, reduce fatigue, help make better decisions, become more comfortable) and *whats* (purpose of adjusting chair is to improve distance from reaching and seeing and internal alignment). Then help them check out for themselves if changing each modification actually improves their alertness or

comfort. This way, employees and managers can discover how to determine and make best chair adjustments for their individual physical makeup.

4. *Enlist a range of worker wisdom for multiple right methods.* Speak with experienced workers, and you'll undoubtedly discover that each has come up with different variations for safely accomplishing their tasks. These alternatives may spring from different experience sets, range of physical conditions, gender, or size. Some may even have a bag full of methods that work for them on different days (because change occurs daily—the weather, how they feel that day, or just to counter mind-numbingly going through the motions). Unless they're dealing with fatality potential risks such as lockout/tagout or process safety, etc., convey expectations there are many ways to successfully lift, push, cross uneven terrain, wield tools, get onto and off a forklift, and more. Again, wherever feasible, emphasize understanding and discovery, rather than issuing one-way-fits-all proclamations.

If you want to move toward highest-level Safety performance, provide workers – and managers – with the tools and room to discover for themselves what works best to make their lives better and safer.

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