



Title: “Quest for Employee Engagement: Chocolate, Vanilla, or Strawberry?”

By Bill Sims, Jr.

“I’ll be honest with you Bill... we’ve got some serious cultural problems. It’s really weird when I walk through the manufacturing plant with our HSE Manager. You can see people scurrying to put their safety glasses and PPE on as they see us approach, only to remove it once we are safely “out of range”, Ann, a safety professional lamented to me. “I feel like a safety cop” she concluded.

Does this scenario sound familiar to you? I’m sure it does.

It plays out exactly the same way, billions of times a day, as people modify their behavior when the boss, the safety manager, or the local police officer come into view.

After pondering her problem for a few moments, I told Ann that the behavior she was reporting to me was perfectly logical, and completely predictable.

“How can that be?” she asked me.

“If you’ll tell me how your incentive system works, I’ll bet we can figure it out together.” I replied.

Ann went on to explain that the incentive program she inherited was a classic lagging indicator incentive system. It rewarded \$50 cash every month that there was no OSHA recordable injury (red flag!) and another \$50 cash every month that there was no safety rule violation observed by Ann’s HSE manager during plant safety audits.

Even more interesting was the fact that the goal was obtained *less than 50% of the time*...so on average, every month one of the two goals would not be met (that means

that every month their management system punished every employee at least one time). How's that for a morale booster?

“Our goal was to get employees to look out for each other and correct unsafe behavior in the moment of choice when nobody else was looking.”

But sadly, their program failed, as punishment based safety programs always do. Why?

Well, first off, the reward for having no recordable injury produced what we all know it produces: injury hiding. It's not rocket science.

Next, the incentive to get workers to look out for each other and correct unsafe behaviors totally backfired as employees learned to simply alert each other that the “Safety Cop” was coming so they could quickly put on PPE until the Safety Cop was gone, and thereby not lose their \$50 bonus. Apparently the employees became more interested in “spotting the safety cop” than in focusing on improving safety. In the world of human behavior, you get what you reward folks.

As Deming says, Ann's plant had a “perfect design to produce the results” they got— injury hiding and a safety cop culture. They made every mistake possible in their misguided attempts at behavior change.

To help us understand how to solve Ann's problem, I'd like to talk about today's workforce, and what I call the “three flavors of employee engagement”. Employee engagement has been identified by Gallup and Towers Perrin as a key driver of your company's profitability and human performance. Sadly, only 15% of workers score as being “actively engaged” (the equivalent of Commitment, below).

When it comes to engagement, every company has just three kinds of workers: *Non-Compliant, Compliant, and Committed.*

Non-Compliant: “I will not follow your safety and quality rules, because I am convinced the only way to get high production is to take risks and shortcuts.”

Compliant: “I will follow your safety and quality procedures, as long as someone (a manager, a supervisor, or a peer observer) is standing there watching me. But when that person leaves, I'll take more risks and shortcuts.”

*Committed: “I will follow the safety and quality procedures **in the moment of choice, when nobody is watching. This is who I am.....”***

Where do you want your culture at?

The answer is obvious. We want every single employee to be ***committed***.

Realistically, with turnover, downsizing, and the stressful demands of doing more with less, we are always going to have a segment of our workforce who are not committed to safety. The message they've gotten from the leadership team is that production is more important than safety. (Why and how that occurs is fascinating, and I'll comment about that in a future article "He did WHAT???: Decoding Mixed Messages from Management About Safety.")

So, the million dollar question is this: "How do you get your Non-Compliant and Compliant employees to move to being Committed to safety, "in the moment of choice, when nobody is watching"?

The method of choice for over 95% of companies today is the same one that Ann's plant uses. I call it "Leave Alone/ZAP!". It is the default method of management around the world today, and almost every safety manager and supervisor have used it, usually without being aware they are doing it.

Have you ever walked past a group of employees doing everything safely (and said nothing to them) but you went immediately to the first employee doing something wrong and you said something? If you answer yes, then you have just engaged in Leave Alone/Zap.

Does this management method work? Yes it does, for a very, very short time.

You can watch it work today as you drive home, when you will probably be driving about 10 miles an hour over the speed limit, along with everyone else in the pack of cars. At this point, you are all *non-compliant*, until you see the police officer pointing his radar gun at you.

What do you (and everyone else) do so as to avoid being "Zapped" with a speeding ticket? You hit the brakes. You (and the entire pack of cars) have just graduated to being *compliant* with the rules that the police want you to follow, at least for a while.

How long does this shift in behavior last? About 30 seconds, when you breathe a sigh of relief as the police officer disappears from your rearview mirror. Whew!

Now what do you do? For most of us, we hit the gas pedal and speed back up, and once again, we become *non-compliant*.

From this short example, it is clear that punishment, negative reinforcement and “leave alone/Zap” management systems fail to produce commitment, and they fail to change worker behavior *“in the moment of choice, when nobody is watching.”*

There are a lot of problems with Ann’s poorly developed incentive system, but the biggest is that it relies on Leave Alone/Zap. This is precisely why she is getting the “safety cop” behavior shift outlined in her quote at the beginning of this story.

So how do you get people to become committed to safety, to do the right thing in the moment of choice?

Is it by increasing the number of safety cops? And having more frequent Zaps? Many managers think so, but they are sadly misguided. More punishment and negative reinforcement will get you more compliance, but it won’t get you commitment.

You can’t punish a team into winning the Super Bowl.

Getting your workforce to be Committed to safety is winning the Super Bowl.

To truly get commitment requires something that is rarely delivered by today’s managers and leaders: Positive Reinforcement.

Let me be clear. I am *not* talking about steak dinners and handing out gift cards and t-shirts for lagging indicators.

That’s not positive reinforcement. In fact, those types of reinforcement actually erode commitment and encourage non-compliance. In short, they breed mediocrity.

How well are our best behavior based safety cultures doing at delivering the positive reinforcement that people crave and need?

The answer will surprise you (just as it shocked me). Stay tuned for my next story...“The Power of Positive Reinforcement”.

The End...

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