

Some Common Safety Behaviour Myths

- 1. Safety is Just Common Sense.** Far from there not being enough common sense in safety, there is too much! Common sense is based upon individual biased perceptions and is acquired in ordinary business and living. Scientific knowledge on the other hand is pursued deliberately and systematically, and is universal. Common sense accepts the obvious and is vague while scientific knowledge questions the obvious and is precise. Base your safety decisions on scientific knowledge rather than common sense.
- 2. Safety Should be the Number One Priority.** Should safety be moved up and down the scale according to how busy you are? No, safety should ideally be a value. What does this mean? If I go to work in the morning there are things I do: I have a coffee, make breakfast, read the paper. But, what if one morning I am running late? I have a quick breakfast, skip the coffee and the paper. The priorities change. However, what is the one thing I will always do? The answer is getting dressed. Regardless of the day I always get dressed – getting dressed is a value as it does not move up and down a list of priorities depending upon the day. Safety should be viewed the same way as a value rather than a priority.
- 3. Zero Harm Should be the Safety Goal.** This is a misapplication of behaviour principles. Remember, the best way to change behaviour is to encourage the behaviour we want (safe behaviour) rather than discourage the behaviour we don't want (zero harm). What does the goal of zero harm mean anyway? No injuries for a day, a week, or a year? And is this on one site or all work sites? Does a worker actually believe they can influence this goal beyond avoiding personal injury? Holding people accountable for numbers they cannot achieve is a sure fire way to produce negative attitudes to safety. The zero harm goal also assumes that all injuries are preventable. When a large company has hundreds (thousands if you include sub-contractors) of workers on many sites having the expectation that all accidents are preventable is unrealistic.
- 4. Audits Encourage Safety Participation.** The purpose of an audit is not to find and celebrate what is working well (encouraging safe performance) but rather to find what is wrong (discouraging at-risk performance) and fix it. This does nothing to encourage want-to safety participation. External audits do encourage competition (pass/fail) which means there are winners and losers. Nobody wants losers in safety! External audits also create high stakes and high stress for those involved. Goodness help anyone who caused an entire company to fail an audit. In addition, external audits only provide a snapshot of a particular site at a particular time yet these results are then used as a judgment for all sites within a company for a period of a year or two. The relationship between performance on an external audit and actual daily safety performance on all sites over a period of time is often very very weak.

5. **Accident Investigations are the Best Method to Analyse Accidents.** The accident investigation approach expects to find and deal with a special cause for an accident. This cause is identified, the person is typically disciplined and then the special cause and the result are publicised. Using this approach workers are reluctant to participate in safety, people are frustrated, and repetition of accidents are common. A No Fault Incident Analysis is an alternative to the accident investigation approach that aims to identify the common causes of the incident. A No Fault Incident Analysis identifies and analyses the common causes, improves the system to encourage the safe behaviours, and shares the findings so that future incidents can be avoided.
6. **Do Something 21 Times and it Becomes a Habit.** This is just plain wrong and it is a dangerous myth for managing safety! For some behaviours it takes us a lot longer than 21 times – did you learn to read or to write after 21 times? Some safe behaviours take a lot of practice to become fluent – certainly more than 21 times. If you expect someone to change some at-risk behaviour into a safe habit, you will be setting yourself up for failure if you think you only need to attend to it 21 times.
7. **LTI Boards are a Great Way to Share Safety Data.** An LTI board which shows the number of consecutive days without an LTI is great as long as no one ever has an accident – or nobody ever reports an accident. The usefulness of an LTI board diminishes as soon as an accident occurs because now the data is meaningless until the previous “high score” is achieved. And sympathy to the person who brought the board back down to zero – this does nothing to encourage participation in safety. In fact, LTI boards are a great way to encourage people *not* to report accidents.
8. **“He is Just Accident Prone – There’s Nothing I Can Do About It.”** This is a classic myth and one which is simply not true. By labelling a person as “accident prone,” you make the problem a personality problem which appears unsolvable. The scientific evidence very clearly shows that behaviour points in the direction of the consequences that follow it. Show leadership to the so-called accident-prone person by encouraging specific safe behaviours and observe the behaviour change effect.