

## **SAFETY DECISION MAKING: *Overcoming Human Nature***

This easy-to-use Leader's Guide is provided to assist in conducting a successful presentation. Featured are:

**INTRODUCTION:** A brief description of the program and the subject that it addresses.

**PROGRAM OUTLINE:** Summarizes the program content. If the program outline is discussed before the video is presented, the entire program will be more meaningful and successful.

**PREPARING FOR AND CONDUCTING THE PRESENTATION:** These sections will help you set up the training environment, help you relate the program to site-specific incidents, and provide program objectives for focusing your presentation.

**REVIEW QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS:** Questions may be copied and given to participants to document how well they understood the information that was presented. Answers to the review questions are provided separately.

### **INTRODUCTION**

During his 30 years working as a safety professional, Tom Harvey has heard many misguided statements that give rise to the mistaken belief that employees will work safely simply because it is the right thing to do. While we can all agree that safety is a good thing, being safe often goes against human nature. In this live presentation, Tom discusses how organizations can better align safety and human nature by successfully using positive and negative outcomes of employee actions to encourage safe decision making and discourage unsafe behavior.

Topics include why working safely goes against human nature, factors that influence the decision-making process, how outcomes of our actions affect future decisions, the concept of "normalized deviation" and creating a positive safety culture by offering and accepting safety feedback.

### **PROGRAM OUTLINE**

#### **CHEMICAL PLANT OPERATOR COMMITS A SERIES OF SAFETY MISTAKES**

- It's another hot, muggy Saturday afternoon in south Louisiana. We look in on Pierre Boudreaux, a chemical plant operator extraordinaire.
- "But, unfortunately, I need to go outside and manually switch over some valves," says Pierre. He is well-trained and the right way to do the job is fresh in his mind.
- "This new process calls for each of the four lines to be switched in isolation," says Pierre's supervisor. "Now, for each closed valve, you must come back down the stairs and bleed the lines ahead of the midstream valve. Then, come back up the stairs and repeat the process for each of the four lines."
- "Up and down the stairs four times?" Pierre asks. "Before and after the transfer makes eight times total?"
- "Don't worry; we'll relocate the valves to the ground level soon," replies his supervisor. "You got any questions?" "I guess not," Pierre responds.
- Just last week, the auditing team checked out Pierre and he came through with flying colors. They are confident Pierre can and will do the job according to the new and improved procedure.
- "Well, here I go, but these new-style suits, they're even hotter than the old ones," Pierre tells a co-worker. "And, their new procedures got me climbing a bunch of stairs."
- Being the safety-minded employee that he is, Pierre says he wished they had "talked to some of us before they blessed us with this new procedure."

- He heads outside to complete his work as assigned and says to a co-worker, “And you know they promised to move those transfer lines down to ground level;” however, 15 minutes later we find Pierre with the top of his suit tied in a knot down around his waist.
- Being quite unhappy about climbing the stairs eight times in his suit, Pierre says, “That ain’t happening today! I’m going to use the old procedure; it’s faster anyway, and the quicker I can get done, the sooner I can be home to Mama’s cool lemonade and splash in the pool with the kids.
- Pierre day dreams about being at home, saying, “It’s such a beautiful day,” with his replying, “It is.”
- Tom says there a lot of mistakes being made in Pierre’s situation, but asks what root causes would be assigned if he got burned with sulfuric acid.
- “That’s not a simple question, and I want you to keep that in mind throughout this program,” he says.

### **WORKING SAFELY GOES AGAINST HUMAN NATURE**

- We can all agree that safety is a good thing, a moral imperative, which gives rise to the mistaken belief that people will work safely because it’s the right thing to do. In his 30 years as a safety professional, Tom has heard many misguided statements to this effect.
- “To be safe, you need to do the right thing,” says one worker. “I’d say it just takes a little common sense,” says another. A third worker says, “Of course, everybody will work safely. Nobody wants to get hurt.”
- Those statements sound good, but they’re meaningless, according to Tom.
- “As humans, we don’t always do the right thing; we don’t always make good decisions. We sometimes take risks and we sometimes get hurt,” he says. “We’re fallible.”
- Tom says he wants the audience to gain a greater understanding of safety-related decision making and the counterintuitive premise “working safely goes against human nature.”
- Think back to Pierre Boudreaux. There is no legitimate excuse for his actions, but there are reasons he did what he did. “I think we can agree that safety is a choice,” says Tom. At some point, you have to make a decision how you’re going to do a particular job.”

### **FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

- “While no one fully understands what motivates people to do what they do, as safety leaders, I mean every one of you—I don’t care what your job title is— we need to understand a few factors that influence our decision-making process,” Tom adds.
- **Workgroup Dynamics:** How do you get along with co-workers? Is it cooperative, or adversarial? Is peer pressure positive or negative? Do you watch out for each other—are people willing and able to give and accept constructive safety feedback?
- **Risk:** The concept of risk is tricky because essentially, safety is the management of risk. How we perceive and react to different risks is critically important. Some people just don’t see risk accurately; their risk tolerance is distorted. Perhaps they have done it over and over and never had anything bad happen or they enjoy being on the edge of danger where the surge of adrenaline and dopamine in their brain feels good. Every time they get that rush, risk taking is reinforced.
- **Mental States:** At any given moment, consciousness is ‘what are you thinking about’ and situational awareness is “knowing what is going on around you.” Is your mind focused on the task at hand or are you daydreaming? Now, let’s add the stress of losing someone close, or going through a bitter divorce or having serious problems with our

children. Many a clear-thinking, good employee has been brought down by altered mental states that compromise their ability to make good decisions.

- “Whether conscious or subconscious, automatic or well-thought out, these factors affect our decisions,” says Tom.

### **OUTCOMES OF OUR ACTIONS AFFECT FUTURE DECISIONS**

- We decide and then we act. After we take an action, outcomes will follow. Keep in mind that these outcomes may be positive and they may be negative, and the more powerful the outcomes, the more they affect our future decisions and actions. In other words, as humans we learn from the results of our decisions and use that knowledge to help us when the time comes to make a similar decision.
- Actions that produce positive outcomes are most likely to be repeated, while those that produce negative outcomes are less likely to be repeated. That’s just human nature.
- Working in an unsafe manner generates powerful positive outcomes, while working in a safe manner often generates powerful negative outcomes. When this is the case, working safely goes against our human nature.
- For a good example of this, let’s go back to Pierre Boudreaux. We know that he chose to not wear all of the PPE because it was too hot and he decided not to climb the stairs to close the valves because it was too hard and took too long.
- The outcome of his decision to work in an unsafe manner was to be able to work more comfortably, with less physical effort while also allowing him to finish sooner and be home in time to swim with his kids. Our human nature is to learn from these positive outcomes, making it more likely that Pierre will make the same unsafe choices in the future.
- On the other hand, having to deal with those hard-to-get-to valves that won’t hold anyway, trying to follow a new procedure that he doesn’t see value in, wearing his hot PPE, taking longer, getting frustrated and on and on—doing the job safely produces all these negative outcomes that discourage safe work.
- Our human nature is also to learn from these negative outcomes, making it more likely that Pierre will not choose to make safe choices in the future.
- All this leads to the conclusion that working safely goes against human nature. So what do we do about it? Our objective has to be to work with human nature rather than against it. To meet this objective, we have to better understand how both positive and negative outcomes are related to safe and unsafe actions.

### **POSITIVE & NEGATIVE OUTCOMES OF UNSAFE ACTIONS**

- “Let’s see if you get it. What are some positive outcomes of unsafe actions?” Tom asks his audience.
- A risk-taking audience member says, “Heck, that’s easy. It’s faster and easier than following a stupid procedure.”
- Tom asks, “Okay, how about the negative outcomes of working safely?”
- “Basically, the opposite of the first one—it’s usually harder and takes more time to do a job safely,” responds another member of the audience.
- “Exactly right, and that is under ideal circumstances, says Tom. “How about if you are trying to follow a bad procedure or work with defective equipment? It’s easy to get frustrated and aggravated, and be tempted to take a shortcut.”

- “You know the drill. What are the negative outcomes of unsafe actions? Anything that would deter us from doing something unsafe?” Tom continues.
- Another audience member replies, “Getting hurt, duh!”
- “Okay, that is pretty straightforward, but the bigger issue is how powerful of a deterrent is that potential outcome—that you might get hurt?” asks Tom.
- The same audience member responds, “Not very powerful because most people think they can get away with it, that it won’t happen to them or they won’t get caught.” Tom agrees.
- The risk-taker thinks to himself, “I’m much smarter than most of these losers. I’m really careful doing things my way, which is much faster and easier than their way. And I’ve never gotten hurt.”
- “The fear of getting hurt turns out to be a pretty weak deterrent to unsafe actions, but we have to change that mindset,” says Tom.
- He stresses, “The bottom line here is that it’s very difficult to force adult workers to do something they don’t want to do. We’ve got to progress from ‘having to work safe’ to ‘wanting to work safe.’”

### **NORMALIZED DEVIATION**

- “In fact, these weak negative outcomes tend to help create an environment where ‘normalized deviation’ can occur. Who knows what normalized deviation is?” asks Tom.
- An audience member answers, “It’s when you do something the wrong way repeatedly, the wrong way becomes the new normal; but, it feels like the right way.”
- “You’re right, it when shortcuts are first taken and allowed to continue; it’s when we learn to live with defective equipment and we find ourselves condoning unsafe actions and conditions,” Tom responds.
- “In short, normalized deviation is when an unacceptable risk becomes acceptable, over time. They are insidious—they creep in little by little,” he adds.
- “That’s what makes normalized deviation so dangerous; there is a growing tolerance and acceptance for things that are just not right,” Tom concludes.

### **POSITIVE OUTCOMES OF SAFE ACTIONS**

- “What are the positive outcomes of safe actions?” Tom asks the audience.
- Several audience members exclaim, “You don’t get hurt!”
- “I think you’re getting it, but not getting hurt is a pretty weak positive outcome because so many people think that they can cheat every now and again, and get away with it, just like our friend Pierre Boudreaux,” says Tom. “What else?”
- One audience member replies, “I try to work safely all the time, and I’m proud of it. I do it for myself and my family; they depend on me.”
- “Excellent. On that positive note, let me summarize what we have just discussed about our safety decisions: Safety decision making leads to actions and those actions produce outcomes which can be both positive and negative,” says Tom. “Those outcomes influence whether or not we will repeat those actions; and, the unfortunate reality is that many of the outcomes we like are often unsafe, and the outcomes we don’t like are often safe.”

- “Given this information, it would seem that no one would ever choose to work safely. but we know that’s not the case,” he continues. “Our saving grace is that we humans are complex thinkers and have the ability to rise above our basic instincts and make wise choices that go against our instant gratification, but it ain’t easy. We need to create an environment where it’s easy for people to make safe choices.

### **GIVING & ACCEPTING SAFETY FEEDBACK**

- “You have to be willing to stand up against peer pressure and make the safe decision instead of just going along,” says one worker.
- “When you know your co-workers will let you know about it when you’re being unsafe, it gives you a little extra incentive to make safe choices,” adds another worker. “Of course, you have to have a good attitude about it. After all, what goes around comes around and we all need a little reminder every now and then.”
- Tom asks the audience if they are ready, willing and able to not only speak up about safety, but to also accept feedback when someone speaks up to them.
- “Understand that safety culture is damaged by reckless acts of condoning. Speaking up is the opposite of condoning,” he says.
- So always speak up and never condone. When people do things right, let them know. Thank them privately and publicly, individually and in groups.
- Don’t mistakenly reward the wrong things such as taking shortcuts to get a job completed, Tom adds. “Nip bad habits in the bud and nurture good habits to build a strong safety culture.”

### **SUMMARY**

- Tom says that as one who labors to improve the lives of others through safety, he tries to remember the words of John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church:  
“Do all the good you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
To all the souls you can,  
In every place you can,  
At all the times you can,  
With all the zeal you can,  
As long as ever you can.”
- “Take these powerful words, and the ideas we have discussed today, and put them into practice every day as you are confronted with choices and decisions that affect the safety of you, your family, your co-workers and your friends,” Tom concludes.

## **PREPARE FOR THE SAFETY MEETING**

Review each section of this Leader's Guide as well as the DVD or digital media. Here are a few suggestions for using the program:

Make everyone aware of the importance the company places on health and safety and how each person must be an active member of the safety team.

Introduce the program and then play it without interruption. Review the program content by presenting the information in the program outline.

### **Here are some suggestions for preparing your video equipment and the room or area you use:**

Check the room or area for quietness, adequate ventilation and temperature, lighting and unobstructed access.

Check the seating arrangement and the audiovisual equipment to ensure that all participants will be able to see and hear the program.

## **CONDUCTING THE PRESENTATION**

Begin the meeting by welcoming the participants. Introduce yourself and give each person the opportunity to become acquainted if there are new people joining the training session.

Explain that the primary purpose of the program is to discuss how organizations can better align safety and human nature by successfully using positive and negative outcomes of employee actions to encourage safe decision making and discourage unsafe behavior.

Introduce the program. Play it without interruption. Review the program content by presenting the information in the program outline.

Lead discussions about how employees can overcome human nature to make a safer and more productive workplace.

After watching the program, the viewer will be able to explain the following:

- Why working safely goes against human nature;
- How various factors affect our decision-making process;
- How positive and negative outcomes of both safe and unsafe actions affect our decisions to repeat those actions;
- What the term “normalized deviation” means and why it is so dangerous;
- How all employees can contribute to a positive safety culture by giving and accepting safety feedback.

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*Overcoming Human Nature*  
**REVIEW QUIZ**

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*The following questions are provided to check how well you understand the information presented during this program.*

1. Pierre Boudreaux hadn't been adequately trained and didn't fully comprehend the new procedures for working with sulfuric acid.
  - a. true
  - b. false
  
2. Statements such as "To be safe, you need to do the right thing" sound good, but they're meaningless.
  - a. true
  - b. false
  
3. \_\_\_\_\_ is knowing what is going on around you.
  - a. Consciousness
  - b. Perception of risk
  - c. Situational awareness
  
4. Working in an unsafe manner often generates powerful positive outcomes.
  - a. true
  - b. false
  
5. The fear of getting hurt is a strong deterrent against unsafe acts.
  - a. true
  - b. false
  
6. Which of the following is an example of "normalized deviation"?
  - a. when shortcuts are first taken and allowed to continue
  - b. when we "learn to live" with defective equipment
  - c. when we find ourselves condoning unsafe actions
  - d. all of the above
  
7. Many of the outcomes of our decisions that we like are unsafe.
  - a. true
  - b. false
  
8. Speaking up is the same thing as condoning.
  - a. true
  - b. false
  
9. You should overlook an unsafe act if it was committed in order to complete a task on schedule.
  - a. true
  - b. false

***ANSWERS TO THE REVIEW QUESTIONS***

1. b

2. a

3. c

4. a

5. b

6. d

7. a

8. b

9. b