The Safety Fatigue Factor

Know The Warning Signs and Change The Energy

I have the luxury of working with many clients who have spent significant time and treasure on improving their safety. But though their efforts have borne results, they face a new challenge...one that threatens to undo all of their good work.

As surely as day is followed by night, significant efforts at improving safety are followed by Safety Fatigue. In fact, the more an organization focuses on safety improvement, the more they are at risk for Safety Fatigue.

When a new safety effort is first introduced, you have a built-in energy. There’s excitement, lots of new actions and rapid improvement. But as the message becomes more familiar, humans naturally become more complacent about it. At best, it becomes habitual (which can be both good and bad). At worst, it becomes background noise. We don’t hear it until it’s gone.

Safety can become a part of our Comfort Zone. That’s not a bad thing, unless we get so comfortable with it that we stop being intentional.
The Warning Signs of Safety Fatigue

How do you know if Safety Fatigue is present?

In the Workplace:
- The only place you hear people talking about Safety is in Safety Meetings.
- Safety discussions/ideas are only initiated by Safety personnel.
- Safety Habits are present, but not consistent
- Though employees may understand the safety message intellectually, they don’t have a personal and emotional connection to safety. (One clue: emotionally connected people use “I” more than “we” when discussing safety.)

In Safety Meetings:
- There is passive participation at best.
- Only one person talks (the leader of the meeting)
- There is no “push back”, just apathy.
- The number of yawns exceeds the number of nods.

Fighting Back

There are several things that can be done to overcome the Safety Fatigue Factor. But remember: nothing works forever. So you have to be constantly re-energizing your safety efforts in you want to avoid complacency and apathy.

- **Keep it Simple.**
  Pick 3 safety messages and reinforce them constantly. What are the 3 things that—if done consistently and constantly—will have the biggest impact on maintaining a safe workplace?

- **Keep it Fresh.**
  You don’t have to change your safety message, but you do have to change the way you deliver it.
  - Rotate the leadership of Safety Meetings and bring in new ideas and presenters.
  - Encourage participation with questions and soliciting ideas, stories and examples from employees.
  - Change the location and/or time of Safety Meetings.
  - Have supervisors lead quick Safety Huddles (5”) throughout the shift, whenever conditions or tasks change, and when safety issues arise.
Keep it Real.
The more your message connects with the reality that employees face, the more it will be internalized.
• Use examples from your own workplace.
• Make your own videos to illustrate safety issues.
• Encourage the sharing of stories to drive the safety message home.

Keep it Positive.
Safety Fatigue can result from a negative focus on safety: all of the “Don’ts” that detail what is not allowed or to be avoided. Taking a positive approach that focuses on the “Dos” for a safe workplace can re-energize your safety efforts.
• Provide proactive actions that can be taken to ensure safe behaviors and mindsets.
• Encourage and collect positive safety stories.
• Spend as much time catching people being safe as reacting to unsafe behaviors.
• Find ways to “fun up” your safety message. Just because something is serious doesn’t mean it has to always be discussed in serious ways. Humor and energy gets people’s attention and gets them out of their Comfort Zones. And that’s when behaviors and mindsets change for the better.
• Promote intentional habits: find new ways to remind people of the importance of those safety activities that have become second-nature. A good rule of thumb: if it goes without saying, be sure to say it.

Safety is never done. Like quality or customer service, it is journey, not a destination. Don’t let the Safety Fatigue Factor be a detour on your safety journey.

For more information on re-energizing your Safety Efforts:

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