

Leadership Series

TOPIC: The Neuroscience of Safety Habits

ACKNOWLEDGE: Thank you for being here and participating in this safety talk. I know your time is valuable, so I will ensure every moment of this talk is worth your while (*make eye contact with the entire group*).

Training Tips:

Ask a lot of questions: While delivering your Safety Talk, ask questions that ‘hook the mind’ and engage your participants. The simple act of asking questions is a High Impact Training technique!

Raise a hand when asking questions: Directed to your audience, you’ll often find that people are more willing to answer your questions and become active participants... try it out! Also, pause for a moment after asking a question; waiting for and encouraging responses from the group.

Provide an example of a personal experience: (or a recent news event) For instance: “A close friend of mine once _____”, or “Just last week _____”. This is a very effective method to help participants relate to your topic. It often helps them to realize: ‘*Yeah, this could affect me. I should listen to this.*’

What’s in it for Me? (WIIFM): I am here to deliver a brief safety talk on the importance of understanding how to help employees change their “bad” safety habits more easily. First, we must understand what exactly a habit is and how it develops.

ASK: What is a habit? (*wait for/encourage responses*)

The dictionary defines habit as: something that we do often and regularly, sometimes without knowing that we are doing it. Alternatively, a habit is the recurring, often unconscious and automatic patterns of thought, behaviour, or feelings that are acquired through frequent repetition.



DID YOU KNOW?

It takes an average of 66 days before a new habit takes root in our brain...it takes repetition and time!

For example, your first time driving a vehicle was likely awkward, felt unnatural, and maybe even nerve-racking.

ASK: Why do you think this is? (*wait for/encourage responses*)

This is because you were doing something you had never done before, so you did not have any neural connections formed in your brain for driving a vehicle. When we learn something new, we make new neural connections in our brain...that’s what learning is! The more you drive, the more neurons continue to fire in the neocortex and your brain makes more, and stronger, synaptic connections. Eventually, the



neuroconnections become so strong, you don't have to even think about driving...it's become a **habit**.

However, if you rent a car while on vacation in New Zealand, where you must sit on the right side of the vehicle and drive on the left-hand side of the road, you'll really have to think about what you're doing because your brain has a neuroconnection for doing the opposite. Therefore, you'll need to fire and wire *new* neural connections for driving on the left-hand side of the road.

ASK: If you stay in New Zealand for years, what do you think will happen to the neurons in your brain?

The neurons in your brain for driving on the right-hand side of the road in Canada will actually *unfire* and *unwire*...you'll start to forget.

STATE: This driving example demonstrates the neuroplastic nature of the brain. Neurons that fire and wire together when we learn new things CAN be unfired and unwired if we don't practice what we've learned.

One of the most challenging aspects of safety management is changing employees' safety habits. It can be exhausting and initiatives sometimes don't seem to work at all. However, now that we understand what a habit is and that they can in fact be changed, here are some hacks for making safety habits easier to change:



- **Focus on what you want, not what you don't want.** As a leader, focus on the outcomes you want to achieve. If you are frustrated, you will tend to make the situation and people's response to you worse.
- **Don't try to make too many changes all at once.** Be selective about the habits you want to change that will have the greatest impact on evolving your safety culture. Too much change at once can overwhelm employees and shut them down.
- **Start with "why" — then "what" and "how."** For example, if a commercial roofer is implementing an improved pre-job hazard assessment process, emphasize the fact that one of the crews recently cut through an electrical cable running across a flat roof because they had not identified it ahead of time with a proper hazard assessment. The outcome could have been serious injury or death. This is the big "why" for the change in how hazard assessments have been habitually "pencil whipped" in the past and not communicated to the entire crew before starting work.
- **A solid management system provides the framework for habits to change.** Substandard conditions are generally easy to correct; simply clean up the spill or remove the tripping hazard. Substandard acts and practices or "habits," on the other hand, are not so easy and can only be controlled by an effective management system:
 - Set clear standards for expected practices and outcomes in writing.
 - Train everyone on the standard with emphasis on the "why."
 - Enforce the standards equally and consistently with tough love.
- **Force creates resistance.** If possible, involve workers in developing the standards that will affect them, or at a minimum allow them choice. For example: Would you like to wear the blue safety glasses, or the orange ones? Would you like to do the monthly inspection at the beginning or at the end of the month?
- **Consistent repetition is key.** Create an environment that supports breaking of the old habits until the new habits can be formed. For example: dispose of the old PPE that's not to be used anymore, to remove temptation. Or schedule the new inspection frequency and attend with the employees to ensure they do it and to support them.

- **Be prepared for people to backslide.** Know that “forgetting” or backsliding is part of the process and never take it personally. Remember it takes time for the neural connections to unfire and unwire the old habits, and then re-fire and re-wire the new ones!
- **Celebrate and reward progress, no matter how small.** Everyone likes praise, and positive emotions have been shown to make people smarter. This in turn reinforces the desired habits and encourages employees make the right choice again in the future.

When you understand how employees develop unconscious and hard-wired habits, you can provide them with the compassion, framework and encouragement that will enable them to successfully adopt new habits. This in turn will help keep them and their co-workers safe and healthy on the job while evolving your safety culture.

Discuss your company policy or rules.

STATE: If you have any questions regarding the topics discussed today, please let me know. If I don’t have an answer for you now, I will direct your question to another individual, if you are comfortable with that. We want you to be safe and feel safe while at work!

Facilitator, remember to:

1. Ask for the commitment of your employees,
2. Answer all questions,
3. Thank them for their time and
4. Document that this safety talk occurred.

RECORD OF SAFETY TALK

Company Name:	Work Location Dept.:
Talk Given by:	Date / Time:

Results of inspection, demonstration or other activity or suggestions during talk:

List of All Employees Who Attended the Safety Talk:	
Name (PRINT)	Signature
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Signed: _____ Position Held: _____