



# Who do you think would win “Stick and Carrot or Hearts and Minds” - Coaching for Safety?

A flashback: we were around the Red Sea, in the Land of the Pharaohs, Egypt. It was 2008, and a young boy in his early twenties had just started his construction safety career. The guy was young and lacked experience. He did not know what was waiting for him in the world outside the window. Still, his dreams were already big: he wanted a meaningful career, and a job based on helping people stay safe was undoubtedly the right one to move forward in the direction of such an ambitious desire.

The first approach in the new environment was in a large fertiliser ammonia plant that employed almost 2,000 workers.

Maybe scared but still determined, this young guy started to work with an American safety manager who had spent half of his life in the military.

The manager had a habit of visiting the site on what was ironically called “the weekly raid” because he used to move like a king among his equeiries when everyone was out. Maybe, he forgot that his time in the army was over, which was a completely different situation.

It was the worst day of the week for the entire project workforce. You could perceive it in the air. The safety manager usually collected around 25 to 30 workers' ID cards for violating some basic safety rules during this safety walk. He led the flock to the site main gate and suddenly fired all of them out of the project premises before

turning around and walking back to the office with a proud smile, the smile of someone satisfied with the tense atmosphere he had created—the smile of someone who was entirely disconnected by the reality of a safe work environment.

That has left what seems to be a permanent cultural imprint on that kid's mind. He continued his career believing that discipline and enforcement are the only way to build a safe working environment, forgetting that it's also about getting the people to know the right things to do based on a belief and not just forcing them to.

So as the years moved on, the little kid has grown to be another safety manager bouncing around different countries and cultures, still upholding the same beliefs and work culture, and passing them on to another generation of safety professionals, until the day when he attended the first 'coaching for performance' workshop. It was then he experienced a major culture shock. Ridiculously, he suddenly realized that employees can't be generally engaged in any safety program under a culture of fear, and simply because the discipline and enforcement model is purely based on the complete removal of an individual's desire to buy into a culture.

Some writers say that every person we meet in life is a cave from which we can learn something new -- you cannot know in advance who this person is, and what you will learn, but it happens. People around you can teach you more than the

best-selling books sold in the bookstores. That was the beginning, to start looking at people from a wider angle where a great potential lies ahead.

For decades, we “health and safety professionals” and industry leaders have been using the traditional styles (instruction and reinforcement) in all our interactions at the workplace (e.g., site inspections, meetings, trainings, incident investigations, T.B.T., etc.). Yet, we continue to see the same incidents occurring repeatedly. A typical response would be to update our H.S.E. program, add more disciplinary rules, connect our incentive program with the incident stats increase supervision, and a long list of actions that revolve around getting people to comply. It is never about why they are non-compliant in the first place. In this model, the human factor is ignored, resulting in a fear-based safety culture. As far as I can remember, almost all the incident investigation reports that I have come across can be summarised as: “People are the problem.” This makes me sorry to see all of the corrective actions we are doing currently. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that you need to scrap all these practices. I still believe that we need some of them, but we should place them in the proper context at the right time to avoid sending the wrong message.

But you also can’t ignore the fact that all of the current ideas, e.g., zero-incident goals, zero-tolerance rules, and “safety is the number one priority”, are centred on getting people to comply. Even though we all know that priorities change with changing circumstances in life, we continue to enforce more rules and expect people to follow. If they don’t, we blame them, ignoring all the surrounding circumstances that have more effect on the chronology of the event than what people must do. So, instead of keeping running the archaic methodologies and expecting different results, we need to start building a human-centric safety culture where safety is seen as a value,

not as a priority; people are genuinely engaged because they want to be, not because they have to: a safety culture that supports a positive work environment that fosters internal growth; a culture that runs by heart and mind, not by stick and carrot.

At first sight, you will realize that to build such a culture, your catalyst will be leaders but not any leaders. We need leaders with specific non-cognitive skills, leaders who are less directive and judgmental, and more curious, raising questions instead of giving instructions, listening more than talking; leaders who have a high degree of emotional intelligence.

And what would be fascinating to you is that with little exposure to the coaching world, you quickly realize that this set of qualities is a summary of the ICF (International Coaching Federation) 11 Core Competencies - Establishing Trust and Intimacy, Active Listening, Powerful Questioning, Direct Communication, Creating Awareness, Managing Progress and Accountability, etc. Cultivating those qualities with our future leaders will yield the birth of a leader who is also a coach.

Les Brown wrote something that, in this setting, I would love to share with the wish that every reader could make these words his/her own ones and move towards a different future for the HSE world:

**“There are winners and losers in our life, and there are people who haven’t discovered how to win. All they need is some coaching. All they need is some help and assistance, just a little support. All they need is some insight or a different strategy or plan of action to make some adjustments that will open the key to a whole new future for them. That will give them access to the unlimited power that they have within themselves. That’s all that they need”.**

If you are interested to know more about coaching in safety, you can visit our YouTube channel:  
<https://www.youtube.com/c/InterdependentLeadership1>

Also, you can reach us here: LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/13991496/>

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