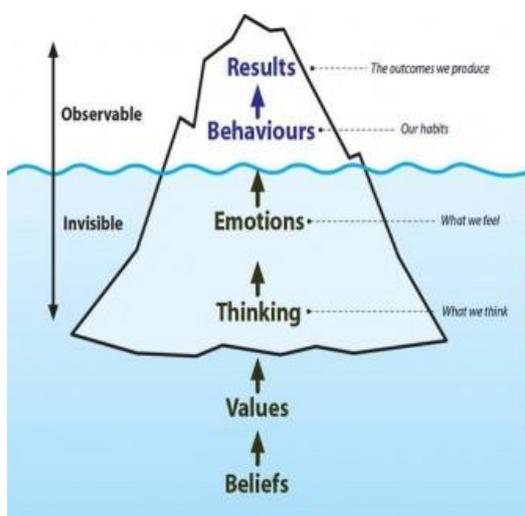


# WHAT REALLY DRIVES SAFETY

By Dr Brett Solomon

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One of the leading factors in embedding a resilient safety culture is having employees who are alert, vigilant in taking the necessary precautions and focused on working safely. In short, we need people who are switched. It makes sense to try motivating workers to be more committed and take responsibility for their safety. We could expect to see significant progress in our safety records if our personnel would just be more aware of their surroundings; constantly seeking potential hazards, and taking the necessary precautions and actions to reduce or illuminate risks. While this is true, it is missing a key component. We first have to answer the question: *What drives human behaviour?*



David Rock has popularised the “iceberg” metaphor. He explained that the safety culture of a company is the product of the collective set of habits of its workforce.<sup>1</sup> It is understandable that leaders target people’s behaviour in an attempt to see the results they are looking for. Appropriate actions lead to required outcomes. Many behaviour-based programmes have this philosophy.

Unfortunately, it is not that straightforward because our safety performance depends upon having the appropriate safe behaviours. However, our actions are fueled by our emotions, which, in turn, are driven by our thoughts and beliefs. In other words, if we want to change people’s conduct we need to start with what

they believe, think, and feel. Adjustments here will have a lasting impact on their work.

Concentrating on results is practical because results are easy to identify and measure. However, the emotions and thinking that influences one’s actions are often downplayed, or ignored, because they are not as tangible or obvious. Yet, it is these “below the surface” subtleties that are the actual contributors to employee’s behaviour. For leaders to be effective influencers of their team’s functioning, it is vital that they delve “below the water” to the deeper makeup of their people.

Rock summarised: “Our [safety] performance depends upon our behaviour, which is guided by our emotions, which are triggered when our thoughts (beliefs, habits, memories, and assumptions) interact with certain situations in our daily life.”<sup>2</sup> It is only when we address this dynamic that we will see the dedication towards safety we so earnestly desire.

Let me share a personal story that will drive home the point. Recently, I was having dinner with an entrepreneur who was eager to do business with me. Getting ready for the evening I was in the men’s bathroom, or so I thought, washing my hands. I was upbeat about the evening as I knew it would be a success. As I was drying my hands, a lady walked in. Immediately my whole demeanour changed.

<sup>1</sup> Rock, D. (2006). *Quiet leadership: Six steps to transforming performance at work*. New York: HarperCollins.

<sup>2</sup> Rock, D. (2006). *Quiet leadership: Six steps to transforming performance at work*. New York: HarperCollins.

Upon seeing her, I went from being bold and confident to being confused. Looking around it became apparent that I was in the ladies' restroom. In another split second my state of mind changed again – this time to one of total embarrassment as I scurried out of there. In one instant, my disposition had switched. Instead of walking out with a feeling of self-assurance, I rushed out feeling like I had egg on my face.

What brought about such radical transformation? It was merely a new thought! In essence, nothing had changed. The bathroom hadn't changed, nor had the basin in which I was washing my hands. I was still in the same restaurant where I had been certain of a fruitful evening. One moment I was calm and collected because I believed I was in the comfort of the gents' restroom. The realisation that my assumption was wrong, however, drove my urgency to get out of there.

While this is a simple analogy, is it possible that we have ideas concerning safety and performance that are misplaced? The dynamics of changing people's outlook and commitment towards safety lies in shifting unhelpful hardwired attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs. That new thought I had released an entirely different set of emotions that triggered another set of behaviours. The challenge faced by leaders is not to control how employees work, but to help them embrace a fresh mindset when it comes to safety. Such adjustments in these areas will manifest in the "above the water" behaviours.

However, before we endeavour to try to influence our workforce, it is paramount that we first define what we want them to believe. It needs to go beyond vague and elusive concepts like "zero harm". It should be more comprehensive than a list of general values hanging on a wall. It is a prerequisite that we first solidify our own thinking regarding what fundamental beliefs are required to have a robust safety culture. Do we know precisely what types of attitudes will make a significant difference in daily practices? We may also want to ask ourselves: What is it in our current culture that is preventing this? More importantly: Are we willing to address them?

In addition, nothing sets the tone for the safety culture more clearly than the role modelling of its leaders. We will never succeed in persuading our employees if we do not practise what we preach. What we do carries more weight than what we say. This is most true when we are under pressure, or when things go wrong. It is the decisions, instructions, the manner of communicating and actions in these situations that reveal our position towards safety. If, at any stage, a leader even suggests that safety can, or should, be neglected; the message is resoundingly clear – safety is not a core value.

When a manager quickly cancels the time allocated to discuss safety, because of the pressing need to get his people into the field, he is sending a strong message that safety is not a priority. On the other hand, when a supervisor calls his team aside and says: "Today we are under immense pressure, but let's take the time to go through today's tasks to ensure that what we do is done safely," the message is unmistakable – we do not compromise on safety.

These random little acts inform people about the real attitude towards safety. Over time, workers become confident that management is serious about safety, and what they are doing is not mere lip service. It is not long before safety becomes an entrenched culture. Such dedication to safety reinforces the understanding that working safely is truly celebrated.

Probably the most pertinent questions to ask are: What do I believe about safety? How important is it to me personally? What adjustments do I have to make in my own thinking? What unintended

messages am I sending? How am I going to intentionally and proactively influence the opinions of my team?

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