

WHY DOES SAFETY ELICIT A DONAL TRUMP-LIKE REACTION?

By Dr Brett Solomon
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How much of what is being done to create a resilient safety culture is even necessary? Moreover, are we focusing on the right things?



Neuroscientists explain that what we believe governs what we think and feel, which ultimately drives our behaviour. Recently I experienced this first-hand while driving with a friend. I noticed how he sped up to 133 km/h and initiated the cruise control. Curious, I asked why he activated it at that particular speed when the limit is 120 km/h.

His retort was very revealing. According to him, the traffic department only starts issuing fines at 130 km/h. Whether this is true is irrelevant, because, in his mind, this means it is permissible to drive to 130 km/h in spite of the 120 km/h restriction. So, why is he adding the extra three kilometres per hour? He quickly explained that the speedometer is not 100-percent accurate, which gives him the additional leeway.

My friend has passed his learner's exam, successfully obtained his driver's licence, completed an advanced drivers' course, has over twenty years driving experience and definitely knows the rules of the road. He even believes speeding is unsafe. Nevertheless, he exceeds the speed limit on a daily basis.

Will refresher training get him to slow down? Will another "speeding kills" campaign cause him to change his driving habits? I sincerely doubt it.

The reason for his lack of compliance has nothing to do with his driving skills or knowledge of the rules. It is in his belief system. He has rationalised his position to such a degree that he does not consider he is breaking the law.

There are countries where the average motorist regards the speed limit as the maximum they are allowed to drive and should typically travel below it. For many South Africans, it seems, the sooner they can reach the speed limit the better. The result of this mindset has compelled the traffic department to deploy more officers, install more cameras, and increase the severity of the fines.

Unfortunately, this has become an incredibly costly solution. To make matters worse, if we look at the ever-increasing death toll on our roads, it is an ineffective strategy. Likewise, I wonder how much of what is being done to create a resilient safety culture is even necessary. Are we even confronting the right issues?

Out of frustration, I often hear safety leaders lament: “If my people would just follow the rules.” Consequently, they have developed strategies to enforce compliance. These often include further training, safety initiatives, stringent disciplinary processes and rewards for those who do comply. How many times is a lot of effort and money being spent combating a problem without addressing the actual source? As part of our strategy to zero harm, would it not be more prudent to have a plan that specifically targets any detrimental attitudes? This is not to say that having these other measures are unnecessary. However, I have yet to see a plan focused entirely on worker’s beliefs concerning safe production.

If I believe safety is a waste of time or a hindrance to meeting deadlines, whenever possible, I will avoid taking the necessary precautions. On the other hand, if I am convinced that working safely is fundamental to reaching production targets then I am going to approach my responsibilities differently.

Fortunately for us, it is usually relatively easy to find out what we believe. Simply say a word and notice your reaction. Try, for instance: Blue Bulls, mother-in-law or Donald Trump. If you are a true-Blue Bulls fan, as soon as their name is mentioned, you experience a sense of pride and loyalty. If you support another team, you will most probably respond with some sort of jeer. If you have a close relationship with your mother-in-law, when you hear her name, it releases a sense of warmth and affection. The opposite will also be true.

If you asked your team about the importance of safety, what would their first thought be? It is not enough to say people are negative or positive. The notion of positive and negative is too broad and general to assist us practically. They are not concrete ideas we can analyse, challenge, and shift. If we want to make real in-roads, it is essential to be completely aware of the prevailing mindsets.

One trait of a superior leader is their ability to create a trusting working environment where employees can be frank about how they feel about safety. Having an honest appraisal as to what people believe is priceless. It affords us the opportunity to find out where or why beliefs were formed. There may be valid reasons for worker’s resistance that need attention.

With this insight, we can devise sound strategies to address the demands and realities of working safely. This also allows us to find out exactly what attitudes are undermining our safety philosophy.

Now we can tackle head-on the specific beliefs that are counter-productive to our safety culture. In doing so, we will be far more effective without wasting unnecessary time, effort, and expense on initiatives that aren't necessary.

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