

PRIMING THE MIND

By Dr Brett Solomon
30 August 2016

I had a fascinating experience on my last trip to Thailand. As part of the package, we had an outing to ride on an elephant. When we arrived, I was surprised to see this formidable elephant tied to a small stump with a thin, dangly piece of rope. I approached the guide and asked if the elephant had ever wandered off. Surely that piece of cord will not stop him from running away?

The guide assured me that the elephant would not even consider leaving. Now I was curious and inquired why that was so. His response was very interesting.



What they do is tie the elephant to the stump from a very young age. The young calf will attempt to break free but will be unable to do so. Eventually, it stops trying, because it no longer believes it can free itself. Now would be easy for the elephant pull free but will not because it has been conditioned to believe that it is impossible.

I wonder how many people have similar beliefs when it comes to safety? How many of our teams really think that “zero” is possible? If they do not, how is that impacting their daily behaviour? One of the biggest challenges leaders face, is not to get employees to work safely, it is to persuade them to believe that they can do so and that it is worthwhile. This change in belief and attitude that will renew people’s commitment to safety and drive a new set of behaviours.

Targeting unhelpful behaviour is a futile exercise if people do not believe change is possible. The demand on leaders is to learn the skill of influencing people’s thinking and beliefs towards safety. Changes here will manifest in behaviour changes.

Numerous scientific experiments have been conducted to prove this. Three Yale University professors studied the impact of “priming” on participants using key words.¹ One sample was primed for rudeness. A set of words were given to the participant to unscramble. Each of the words were associated with some form of being abrupt, or impatient. Another group did the same exercise, but their words reinforced the notion of being polite and respectful.

¹ Bargh, J.A., Chen, M. & Burrows, L. (1996). Automaticity of Social Behaviour: Direct Effects of Trait Construct and Stereotype Activation on Action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, 230-244.

After they had completed the assignment, participants were asked to hand the results to another professor. When they arrived, that person was engaged in a conversation that forced the participants to wait. Consistently, the participants who were primed with words relating to rudeness became annoyed far more quickly than those who were primed for patience. They interrupted the discussion significantly faster than the other group. In fact, consistently the “patient” group waited respectfully for up to ten minutes for the conversation to conclude. This is a startling finding.

Priming is basically influencing someone towards a desired outcome. It is not brainwashing, as you cannot give someone a range of words concerning robbing a bank and expect them to go and do it. However, it does trigger the unconscious to think, feel, and behave in a conspicuous manner. It creates structures of thinking.

In the experiment, there was a definite change of behaviour when exposed to key words. The professors made the participant’s subconscious obsessed with a state of being. What are you making the subconscious of your employees obsessed about? Are you priming them for safety?

Furthermore, if I tell you to think of a red balloon, there is a high probability that an image of a red balloon will pop into your mind. You simply can’t help it. Now, if I tell you to not think of a red balloon, you will most probably still think of the balloon. Likewise, it is essential that leaders discuss what they want, instead of what they do not want. It is communicating in a way that people cannot help but ponder and consider what was said.

It catches their attention, and they make it their focus. This is even more important when we understand that the conscious mind can only handle four chunks of information at one time. This does not mean four things. A stimulating conversation, or driving a car attentively, will use all four units. The conscious mind has a very limited processing capacity.

We have the ability to influence the things on which our employees concentrate. What is the image you want your employees to see? What attitudes do you want them to embody? Are you communicating in a way that stimulates those thoughts; or just the opposite? Are we persuading our workers to be mindful or are we distracting their four chunks of working memory?

This is an easy tool to use, allowing leaders to communicate the importance and value of safety consistently. In what ways are you intentionally priming your team to work each day safely? What is the focus and quality of your pre-shift meetings? Remember, a leader’s attitude has an infectious influence on their teams.

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