

Participation-Based Safety: The Next Frontier

7 QUESTIONS WITH DR. JUDY AGNEW

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With 25 years of experience working with clients to create behavioral-based safety interventions that ensure organizations are safe by design, there's no one more well versed in worker participation than safety expert, Dr. Judy Agnew.

We caught up with Dr. Agnew to discuss what organizations can do to increase participation in their EHS programs and improve safety performance.

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Dr. Agnew is also the author of three acclaimed safety books, *A Supervisor's Guide to Safety Leadership*, *Safe by Accident? Take the Luck out of Safety: Leadership Practices that Build a Sustainable Safety Culture* (with Aubrey Daniels) and *Removing Obstacles to Safety* (with Gail Snyder).

Q: *Are you seeing more importance placed upon safety culture and worker participation now than in the past? If so, why do you think this is the case?*

A: Safety is completely different now from when I started in this field 25 years ago. When I first started consulting, there were many companies across industries with very high incident rates. Looking back on it now, it's astounding.

But at the time, these companies weren't doing some things that are considered very basic today. They didn't have hazard identification processes. They didn't have good work order systems. They lacked the fundamental safety practices that nearly everyone does today.

In recent years, I've spoken to so many safety professionals who tell me, 'my company has done a great job: our safety performance has improved dramatically over the past 5-10 years, but we've plateaued'.

I hear this so often because these EHS professionals have done everything they know how to do, and they've seen good results, but they're still not where they want to be.

I think safety culture, behavior and worker participation has become the new focus because that's where the opportunity is. It's the next frontier that leaders see as the biggest opportunity for driving safety improvement.

Q: *What barriers do you see EHS professionals come across when trying to improve participation in safety?*

A: One barrier would be in the leadership shift that management must make and the time commitment required. A more participation-focused leadership style just takes time to develop.

Stopping and talking to workers, acknowledging the things they're doing well and asking for their input is so important and requires more time than to just walk through, point out what's wrong and tell people what to do.

If your health and safety team is viewed as police – that's another barrier to overcome. Some organizations have done a good job of ensuring their EHS personnel are helpful coaches, not enforcers.

If your health and safety department has been doing a lot of rule enforcing, why would workers want to participate more with people who have been the source of negative consequences?

Q: *What motivates workers to participate in safety activities?*

A: At the frontline, there are many things that are important to motivate workers to participate more in safety. The number one thing is their experience around safety from a consequence perspective.

I'll share a story to illustrate this: when we do assessment work, we go out and talk to workers at all levels of the organization, but when we talk to frontline workers, one of the things we often hear is, 'the only time I ever hear from my boss about safety is when I've done something wrong.'

So the sentiment among many frontline workers is: I get nothing but negative around safety so why would I want to participate more? Why would I raise my hand and say 'I want to do more of this' when it's a negative experience for me?

The most effective way to motivate employees to participate more is to use positive reinforcement. Acknowledge the things workers are doing well. I always tell safety leaders, workers are doing things safely at least 90% of the time, or else they wouldn't be working for you.

The majority of the time, our employees are deserving of some recognition, and yet we still focus much of our effort on the very small proportion of time they're not doing it right.

Secondly, we need to ask our employees for their opinion. A lot of the time, frontline workers are not used to being asked for their thoughts. Many of them just believe they're there to do a job, do what they're told and keep their head down.

You have to counter this and say, 'we want to hear what you think. We want you to tell us what's going on. We want you to participate more.'

When workers do participate, there must be some positive reinforcement for doing so. The classic suggestion box where people put in suggestions and never hear about them again is the kiss of death.

If you want people to participate and then either ignore them when they do participate or worse - criticize them or in some way punish the very participation you've asked for, you're going to get less of it.

Q: *What advice would you give to organizations looking to build safety cultures that foster participation?*

A: The most important thing is to encourage the use of more positive reinforcement. This concept sounds overly simplistic, but it's not easy to do.

I would recommend that safety professionals start by going to their leadership teams and asking them what they want to see improved in terms of employee behavior and participation - ask them for two specific behaviors.

Then, when they tell you the two behaviors they want improved, suggest that whenever the leaders see those two behaviors they go out and say something positive to the workers about what they've observed. Stop and talk to them, ask them how they figured out how to do those things safely.

Encourage leaders to gradually start doing more of that. Nobody's going to make a dramatic shift in how they lead and manage overnight. It's got to be gradual. Give them manageable, easy-to-do steps towards making that improvement.

I think that EHS professionals need to do more of this as well. If you've typically been an enforcer, my suggestion would be to go out and spend two weeks in the field using more positive reinforcement.

Then, start asking for participation in very specific ways. Go up to workers and ask for their input on a particular item or ask for their insight during a safety meeting. Make it easy for your people to participate and then reinforce that participation.

Q: *What metrics would you recommend organizations start tracking to measure participation?*

A: There are many metrics a safety team could track depending on their industry and the type of participation they're expecting, but a few of the more general KPIs that would apply across most organizations are:

- The number of safety observations completed
- How much workers are talking during safety meetings (both pre-shift toolbox talks & more formal safety meetings)
- The amount of time the leader is talking in meetings versus the amount of time workers are talking
- The number of near-misses reported

I'd also recommend that organizations use employee surveys to gauge and track participation. This can serve as a great baseline measurement of how willing employees are to participate and how you can improve.

Q: *Can the use of technology help foster engagement and participation?*

A: Anything organizations can do to make it easier for employees to participate in engagement behavior, the better.

For example, if we make it easy for workers to report hazards, they're going to report more hazards – and technology can certainly help us do that.

If your hazard reporting process requires employees to stop what they're doing and go grab a pen and paper to fill out a form – they just won't do it. They're busy and have other work to do.

Technology also helps us provide immediate, continuous feedback on what's happening. Let's say I'm reporting a near-miss using technology.

That technology can then provide me with instant feedback, alerting me that my near-miss has been logged in the safety management system and someone will follow-up and take care of the issue.

You can't underestimate the importance of that type of immediate feedback that is so often missing in a largely paper and pencil type of environment.

Q: *How have you seen increased participation lead to improved safety performance?*

A: When we do our assessment work, we can tell right away if an organization has good participation at the frontline and leadership levels.

In organizations with high levels of participation, they talk about safety differently. To them, safety is very collaborative and you can tell there's respect for everyone's opinions and everyone has input that's valuable across the organization.

I recently worked with a client who instituted a new near-miss reporting program and they've had a dramatic increase in participation as a result. Reporting has increased and in conjunction with that, they've worked to change their safety culture.

They're now having better conversations with workers, asking more questions and are reinforcing participation – which has all helped to dramatically improve safety performance.

I see this kind of cultural transformation all the time and it makes a big difference – especially to frontline workers. I’ve had frontline workers tell me, ‘this used to just be a job that I came in and did’ but now they’re excited to come to work because they feel valued.

When workers feel like what they say and do matters and it’s tied to safety, it’s easy for everyone to get on board because it helps everyone in the organization. It’s a very powerful thing when you can capture this and drive participation in safety.

ABOUT JUDY AGNEW

Judy Agnew, Ph.D., Senior Vice President, Safety Solutions, Aubrey Daniels International (ADI), is a recognized thought leader in the field of behavior-based safety, safety leadership, safety culture, and performance management.

She is an expert consultant who works with clients to create behavioral interventions that ensure organizations are safe by design. As Senior Vice President of Safety Solutions at Aubrey Daniels International (ADI), Judy partners with clients to create behavior-based interventions that use positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability.

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