SAFETY HABITS - Coaching out the bad ones and coaching in good ones

In the last two-part Safety Wild series, we talked about habits; How they form, by repeating an action over and over and how they are maintained, by the striatum on “auto pilot”. Here we discuss replacing bad habits with good habits.

We also talked about the “trigger” and the ability of “mindfulness” to reengage the pre-frontal cortex (PFC); Taking back the decision-making process.

Below is a simple (but not easy) 5-step process that can be used to create new, safer habits for you and your team.

**REASON:** Every individual must have a reason to change a bad habit and create good habit. Without a reason, it is difficult to motivate the PFC into the mindful process of creating a habit by repetition. The reason must be determined by the person changing the habit. If a supervisor provides the reason, its their reason and is unlikely to motivate change.

An example may be a route driver or a landfill traffic director that consistently looks at their phone instead of paying attention to their route or tipping floor customers. What is their reason to change behavior? Hopefully, the individual recognizes their behavior is unsafe, can result in injury or death, and truly believes in their reason to change.

**TRIGGER:** Determine the trigger for engaging in the unsafe action. In this example, the trigger that causes the employee to look at their phone can vary. It could be the ring sound, the vibration, the ding of an incoming text. These triggers can feel amplified when expecting a call from family members, or other important contacts. Identifying the trigger and figuring out how to neutralize it is key to creating a new habit.

For a cell phone, placing the phone in a backpack, turning it off, or leaving it in your locker may neutralize the trigger.

**MICRO-HABIT:** A micro-habit is the first attainable step to creating a new, safer habit. If we believe in the reason to create a new habit and have identified the trigger, now it is time to create a micro-habit that is safe and repeatable and can be practiced until it forms a new, safer habit.

For the phone example, a micro-habit may consist of checking the phone hourly, after coming to a complete stop and safely securing the vehicle, or maybe checking during break and lunch or after a portion of the route is completed. The idea is that by repeating this safe micro-habit, it will sink into the striatum and ultimately become a new, safer habit.

**PRACTICE:** It takes practice to repeat a micro-habit over and over again until it becomes a habit. Practice the micro-habit until it replaces the old unsafe habit. This is easier said than done and requires discipline, mindfulness and circling back to the reason, the “vow” taken, the motivation to keep developing the new habit. Expect small failures along the way and have a plan to get back on track.

**PLAN:** A written plan helps. Write down the reason, trigger and micro-habit. Memorialize the process and create a written plan for the employee and supervisor to follow and review. Set dates to review the plan. Reward successes and be patient with failures, which will happen. Keep in mind, as humans, we are up against biological, neural pathways which have developed over millions of years for our survival. The process is not easy, but with patience, motivation and a plan to guide the process, unsafe behaviors can be retired and new safer habits can be created.

This 5-step coaching process can be utilized for changing a variety of unsafe behaviors or work practices, but it is not easy and takes time, patience, mindfulness and buy-in from both employees and supervisors. Most importantly, while supervisors can help lead and document the process, the individual changing the habit needs to be identify the reason, trigger & micro-habit. They will have to put in the hard work practicing and it has to be THEIR PLAN.