

Overcoming The Conflict Within

“Do you want to get hurt while you are at work?”

“No, of course not!”

We could expect this response from anyone we asked. In fact during the course of the hundreds of workshops I have run, I have indeed asked thousands of people this question and always get the same response. This is why achieving a safe workplace is so easy; we all want the same outcome!

Of course it isn't that simple. We might not want to have an accident, but we do want all the other perceived benefits that taking a short cut or working unsafely can deliver: saving time, being more comfortable, fitting in with everyone else, or getting recognition from the boss for having the best output results. Most of these benefits are going to deliver more quickly and are fairly certain whereas the downside - having that accident, probably won't happen anyway. The well debated accident triangle illustrates nicely that most of the time when we work unsafely we get away with it.

Yet how do we reconcile our unsafe behaviour with the original desire to stay safe. These two conflicting thoughts give rise to an uncomfortable tension within our minds. This is known as cognitive dissonance and can be a very powerful motivator. The degree of dissonance can vary but will increase as the difference between the two thoughts gets greater; for example as the risk from the unsafe behaviour increases. Because we are not comfortable with the tension between these conflicting thoughts it is natural for us to try and reduce the dissonance. We can achieve this in a number of ways;

- We can change our behaviour (work safely);
- We can justify our (unsafe) behaviour by changing our thoughts about our safety – *“actually, I don't care if I do get hurt”* – unlikely, but may occur in some extreme situations;
- We can justify our behaviour by adding in new thoughts or beliefs – *“it's not really dangerous”, “I am only doing it this once”, “everyone else does it this way”*. Problem solved dissonance overcome.

It is remarkable what lengths we will go to in order to delude ourselves that everything in the garden is rosy, when quite clearly it is not. Just think about all the arguments that people come up with regarding killing themselves slowly by smoking; or all the justification for putting themselves, their families and those around them at outrageous levels of risk when driving dangerously.

When someone else comes along and tells us how stupid we are to behave that way we have another dissonance set up, and this time, because it is about our self-image it is even more powerful hence the need to argue back and defend our position, or at least greatly resent the person who has created the dissonance by pointing out the foolishness of our behaviour. This is why we need to think carefully about how we handle unsafe behaviour and why change is much more likely to occur if the recognition of a need to change comes from within the person themselves. If we can increase the personal recognition that we really could get hurt by picturing the accident occurring then we are much more likely to achieve a change in behaviour.