

Taking safety personally

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A year after the BP explosion and oil spill, those trying to find someone to blame are misguided, says psychological scientist E. Scott Geller, Alumni Distinguished professor at Virginia Tech, and author of a new paper published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science. Geller has spent much of his 42-year career developing interventions to keep people safe, particularly helping companies develop a culture that promotes occupational safety.

There's almost never one person to blame for an injury; instead, companies need to develop a culture where individual workers feel empowered to point out problems and raise concerns about each other's [safety](#). Media reports have suggested workers on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig were discouraged from reporting hazards, minor injuries, and other close calls. "The disaster would have been prevented if [people](#) were willing to speak up and report the hazards," Geller says. Many companies have policies that reward a supervisor for having a low number of injuries per work hour. But that discourages the reporting of injuries, and provides no incentive for analyzing close calls.

Indeed, Geller objects to the idea the disaster, or any crash, collision, or explosion, has a root cause. "Root cause? No. There are contributing factors," Geller says. For example, take someone who falls and breaks a bone at work because he climbed on a chair to reach something. In that case, you should listen to what excuses are given. "He might say, 'I didn't use the right ladder because it wasn't available, or I didn't go and get the right ladder because my supervisor is pushing me to get the job done

fast," Geller says. Listening to workers can lead to a safer workplace—keeping the ladder closer to where it's needed, or emphasizing that safety is more important than speed.

Having a culture of safety also means using positive reinforcement rather than threats. "Psychologists know threats have only a temporary effect, if any," Geller says. And threats have undesirable side effects. People don't want to be around a supervisor who threatens them. Threats of enforcement influence some people to try and beat the system in order to assert individual freedom.

But the reflexive response to something dangerous is to make a law or policy against the related behavior. A few years ago, Geller and his students tried two ways of getting people to fasten their vehicle safety belts. They stood near the exit to parking lots at the university, and when they saw someone driving without a safety belt, they held up a sign: either one with the popular slogan "Click It or Ticket" or one that read "Please Buckle Up—I Care." The positive sign got significantly more drivers to buckle up. "Click It or Ticket" provoked some rude gestures.

The main message is that people should take safety personally, Geller says. Countless drivers have sent a text message while at the wheel and survived. But a video circulating on the internet tells the story of real people who were killed because of a texting driver. That makes the danger seem real. "We know from experience that emotions are motivating," Geller says. Making safety a personal issue makes people care more; seeing that video may make them think twice and realize the text message can wait.

In fact, Geller says, caring about safety means actively caring for the people around you. It's caring enough to speak up when your coworker has forgotten his or her hard hat, or starting a serious conversation about safety on the assembly line. "The BP disaster got many people suddenly

taking safety personally, but we've got to take it personally before the disaster," he says.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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