

Affective Safety Management™

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IIRSM is setting up a new safety initiative, called "Affective Safety Management", which aims to apply accelerated learning techniques to safety management.

The fitter pulled a magnet out of his overall pocket, and explained how he used it to defeat the interlock guards on machines so he could adjust them while they were in motion.

“I know I shouldn’t, “ he said “ and one day I’ll be caught out, and either killed or maimed. But I’m under such pressure to get the machines running again.”

His story is not unique, and on average, someone dies in a work-related accident in Britain every day of the year. This fitter was not stupid, he was in fact bright and intelligent, and fully aware of the risks. He was simply responding to the pressures that he felt bearing down on him. Of course, it is not rational to ignore your own safety just to get a machine running again, but this is the point – we are not rational creatures.

Our behaviour is driven not so much by rational considerations as by emotive pressures. This fitter was responding to the pressures he felt. He was driven by his feelings, and those feelings were so strong they overrode any rational considerations.

Yet most management techniques, including safety management, assume that people are rational and will behave rationally. When they don’t, we assume that they need to be disciplined for behaving irrationally. We seldom take into account their feelings.

It is the same with safety training. We put the trainees into a room, put a presenter in front of them, and present information at them, in the belief that, being rational, they will take on board everything we tell them. But consider how a child learns. Children learn by playing, by trying things out, by discovering what works and what doesn’t. By the age of three or four most have learned the complex task of walking, and can speak a language. Then we bang them up in institutions called schools, tell them to sit still, shut up and listen, and we wonder why, eleven years later, a significant number can barely read or write the language they learned to speak as a child. We have taken the fun and wonder out of the learning process. And we continue to do the same with adult training.

Adult learning can be and should be fun. Learning is something you do, not something that is done to you, so the learners must be active, doing things, debating issues, and exploring concepts for themselves. Training should, in short, evoke feelings other than boredom!

There has to be a better way, and for two years I have been writing articles, speaking at conferences, and delivering training showing how “neurolinguistic programming”

(NLP) can be used to understand why people take short cuts on safety. If we can understand the intention behind the behaviour, we can remove the need for people to take short cuts. More recently, I have been using “accelerated learning” techniques in safety training, so that the learners learn by doing, not by listening or by being put to sleep by acetates or endless electronic presentations.

Now, the IIRSM Board of Governors has asked me to take on a project to look at best practice in these areas, pulling it together, exploring new techniques and sharing the lessons learned. IIRSM have come up with the term “Affective Safety Management,” for an approach which takes into account peoples feelings and emotions at work, and we believe it may be the most significant step forward in safety management for years.

Already, I have made contact with people who have expertise in the areas of NLP and accelerated learning or who have expressed an interest in the application of these techniques, and I will be reporting on these as discussions progress.

However, the Institute needs the involvement of members, too. It needs to know who would like to know more, and we need to hear from those who may have applied similar techniques, and what they learned from them.

I will be speaking to the Worcester Health & Safety Group on accelerated learning in October, and to our West Midlands Group on NLP later in the year, and would be happy to do the same to other groups or organisations who are interested.

Longer term, it may be possible to run a conference on Affective Safety Management, open up a website message board for people to share their experiences, or even to publish guidance on these approaches. In the shorter term, we will be publishing regular reports in our newsletter. The scope of the project will be determined by what people want to put into it and draw from it.

This is an exciting project, and it is entirely in accordance with the Institute’s principles to take the lead in it.

The close links which the Institute has with its members will enable real benefits to flow from it, and real progress to be made in the field of safety management.

If you want to be part of it, please write to or e-mail Julie at the Institute on julie_s@iirsm.org, or e-mail Lyndon at little_dragon@blueyonder.co.uk