

Safety Corner

What are the common motivation strategies for accident prevention?

Punishment and incentives are both common motivation strategies designed to change workers' behaviours for accident prevention. While punitive laws and regulations have been the traditional strategy for motivating workers towards a safe behaviour, the evidence for its effectiveness is limited. The emphasis of a punitive strategy is on process or behaviour controls such as failure to use certain safety equipment or obeying safety rules, instead of focusing on the end result, which is safety. Process and behaviour controls are cumbersome to design and implement, and they can never encompass all undesirable behaviours among all workers at all times.

Punishment also creates a negative organizational climate marked by resentment, uncooperativeness, antagonism and even sabotage. A punitive system treats workers as if they were irresponsible and eventually some will behave as if they were. Listing certain actions as unlawful may prompt some individuals to break the law just to show that they can— the “bad boy” syndrome. As a result, the very behaviour that was to be prevented may in fact be encouraged.

In contrast to punishment, incentives and recognition programmes are generally found more effective for safety than engineering improvements, personnel selection and other types of intervention which include disciplinary action, special licensing, and exercise and stress-reduction programmes.

Incentives and recognition programmes tend to bring in positive side effects such as a more pleasant social climate at the workplace as workers feel their achievements being acknowledged. They enhance people's prospect of future recognition and induced them to look to the future with positive expectation. Workers thus are more inclined to take action to protect their health and safety. However, Incentives and recognition programmes may lead to under-reporting of accidents but this phenomenon is usually limited to relatively minor injuries and property damage.

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