



Challenging Yourself and Others: A Key Transformational Skill

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Why challenge yourself?

After all, the very nature of the word, challenge, can be confrontational. So why do it?

I'm reading a book about Wild Bill Hickock, the first American gunfighter. Once word spread far and wide that he was the fastest draw in the West, he had a target on his back. People saw him as their next challenge. The result? Many people died from his gun. And eventually, he died from one of theirs while playing cards. Challenge over.

For good reason, the confrontational aspect of being challenged is not helpful.

In the safety world, however, we think of challenging as helping people recognize paradigms about how things are done and to think creatively about how to do things differently. In other words, your thoughts and your actions can influence the thoughts and actions of others.

Many leaders believe in control. They want to immediately control the actions of their workforce. But if you really want to transform people, you have to slow down your process. You can't just dictate change and others will follow. Instead, to really challenge others to make changes, you have to understand your own thought process first. This more effectively allows you to address the actions of others.

Start by asking why. Why challenge? In the context of safety, you want to develop new thought processes because you can do better protecting yourself and others. This is especially

important in our new world of the Covid-19 pandemic. We can do better at protection because we must.

So why challenge? The answer is because we'll be more effective in recognizing that what we are doing may not be effective for the current situation we are in. With that new perspective, creative possibilities can be unleashed, which will lead to new safety solutions. And if you can use it for safety solutions, you can use it with anything.

You'll want to examine this safety leadership prism so you can get better at transforming people for the better. So how do you do that?

The Key Concepts of Challenging

Here, we're going to walk through the six key concepts of challenging in safety.

We already covered the first one. Why challenge? Challenging means stimulating innovations and creativity as well as encouraging others to question assumptions to approach old situations in new ways. If you recognize a need for change, thinking about doing things differently is the first step to get there

Paradigms are both helpful and hindering.

Paradigms prevent us from being creative and from finding new, innovative solutions to old problems. Remember, there are paradigms that can both help us and hurt us. An example: I have always trained myself to look both ways before I cross a street. We call it "eyes on path." It's an ingrained thought process. But I'm looking both ways from side to side, not up and down. Think about the exposure. There could be a tripping hazard at my feet or an overhead object.

Challenging starts by being aware of our paradigms.

We have to create an environment where we force ourselves to think in new ways so we're not limited. Another example: I am grocery shopping in a pandemic. Normally I spend the time searching for the most affordable price. Now, my priority is to get out of there as fast as possible. Is saving two cents on cereal worth an additional 30 seconds of exposure? Not anymore. My paradigm has changed.

Challenging is not criticism.

Thinking differently doesn't mean thinking correctly. It doesn't mean the way I thought about the past is now wrong. It means I recognize I'm in a new environment and thinking about things with a fresh set of eyes is a good thing. For leaders, the message to the workforce is not "this is not good enough;" but rather, "how can we do this better?"

You do not need to be an expert to challenge.

This is particularly true in safety. You don't have to be a professional airline pilot to have conversations with a professional airline pilot about navigating the friendly skies in a new and different way. As a leader you may not have specific knowledge of lock-out tag-out or of every specific equipment in the plant. If you're managing a chemical facility or any energy processing facility, there are a 100 pieces of equipment that have specific lock-out tag-out procedures. It is crucial to have a general understanding of why the procedure is important. As long as you challenge with the use of thoughtful and thought-provoking questions—and do not try to make it look as if you are an expert—lack of expertise is unlikely to be a problem.

Challenging leaders build respect and relationships.

If you challenge successfully and your team starts to come up with new ways to do things, there is a risk that you will not be able to adopt the team's ideas. Make sure that you manage expectations accordingly in order to avoid a loss of commitment. You have to focus on what you can do and be open about things you can't do. You don't have to overpromise. Remember: There is a danger in over-promising.

What You Can Do Right Now to Challenge

So how can you challenge paradigms in a way that is safe, productive, and most importantly, transformative? Here is a four-step solution.

First, question assumptions. You need a fresh set of eyes. You want to explore what other people are thinking through their eyes. What you don't want is the attitude that it's your way or the highway. Questioning assumptions gives you the opportunity to work on collaborating and team building skills.

Secondly, explore other perspectives. Ask yourself: What other views could exist to address this challenge? That will lead you to:

Examine problems from various angles. At DEKRA, we like to look at the three roots of every injury or fatality. We like to look at behaviors, the equipment, and the system and procedures. By looking at three different roots causes, that will prompt you to:

Prompt alternative solutions. What are solutions that might positively affect any of the overlooked root causes?

Think Differently, Act Differently

Once you challenge your thinking by considering all sources of exposure you will act differently. For example, now you will look up and down now as well as left and right. Your ability to get out of your own mind trap can be leveraged into helping others challenge their thinking. This is the critical first step on the road to desired change in yourself and ultimately in others.

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