



# WHAT ARE YOUR SAFETY BELIEFS?

Not keeping safety top of mind makes injury that much more likely

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**W**hat does it mean when a person says that they “believe” something? In my view, the term is often misused. I see the word “belief” as having deeper meaning than what society often allots to it. It is probably more accurate for a person to say “I think” or “I guess” rather than “I believe,” because the latter implies that you are certain of its truth. Our beliefs form the foundation of our view of the world and act as our compass when we make decisions. Beliefs may even be important enough to an individual that they are willing to fight for them.

Some of our beliefs have been stated so many times that they can now be

classified as platitudes. A platitude is a moral statement that has been over-used to the extent that it has lost meaning. When we hear the same phrase over and over, the effect is dulled and it doesn’t grab our attention any longer. Those beliefs (now platitudes) are still represented by a voice in our consciousness, but they are no longer dominant voices and can be easily overruled by other concerns.

Many of us would say that “Safety First” ranks among our personal beliefs. We often don’t give it a second thought when we say it or see it on a poster, because we have heard it innumerable times over the years and nobody seems to ever question it. However, while it seems to be the right thing to say, do we actually believe it and act on it?

Mike Rowe of TV’s *Dirty Jobs* fame has some interesting thoughts on the subject. Rowe has proclaimed the idea of “Safety Third,” which immediately grabs his viewers’ attention. No matter how you interpret his statement, it causes you to stop and wonder who would have the nerve to say such a thing. Taken at face value, Rowe appears to be an unfeeling brute to say that any concern could be more important than safety.

My personal take on Rowe’s Safety Third declaration is that he is trying to get people to think about what they truly believe. He is absolutely correct when he says that Safety First has become a platitude that no longer has the desired effect on the listener or the person who utters it. Many of us have been conditioned out of believing that safety

should be the dominant concern when we make decisions.

Our problem with the safety message is that it implies an investment, and to some extent, deferred gratification. As humans, we have certain traits that have always been and will never change, and one of those is our bent towards what I call “Faster Easier.” We analyze pretty much every task we perform in terms of how much time and effort it will require to get the job done. Decisions on the methods we will use are often made with the goal of reducing the personal investment required to complete the task. Risk can also be a factor in our decision making, but we tend to downplay the risk if we perceive there is a significant reward waiting for us.

This is where our beliefs come in to play, and unfortunately, many of us cling to beliefs that run counter to the safety message. Worse yet, these are the beliefs that tend to be reinforced by our inclination to Faster Easier. While the still small voice of safety isn't completely muted, it tends to be drowned out by the voices that advocate for getting the job done as quickly and easily as possible.

So, what are the beliefs that influence our decision making towards putting ourselves and our coworkers at risk? I would suggest that for many of us, these beliefs reside in our subconscious, only making themselves known when we are under pressure to get a task done. Let's take a look at some common examples and consider carefully whether we grant them safe harbor in our personal belief system.

### **Safety and production are two different things**

The age-old struggle between production and safety will probably never go away. This is driven by our natural tendency to acquire a case of tunnel vision as we work. In the here and now, it can be enormously difficult to discipline

oneself to see the bigger picture, which is that incidents are so expensive that safety has become a solid business decision. When I say incidents are expensive, I'm not just talking about the dollar value. The physical, emotional, and spiritual costs related to a workplace injury cannot be quantified in those terms.

An interesting aspect of this belief is how its voice gets louder as the work day progresses. As the worker draws closer to quitting time, their ability to objectively analyze risk diminishes. That, combined with the overvalued reward of getting home on time often leads workers to make bad safety decisions late in their shifts.

### **Taking risks makes me a better employee**

Some workers believe that their supervisor would prefer them to stick their necks out, if necessary, to get their jobs done. This might be an accurate perception, as it could very well be that their supervisor has made room in their personal belief system for this attitude.

The supervisor has the most control over whether this belief takes a foothold in their workforce. Without even realizing it, they may be rewarding their workers for taking risks by slapping them on the back for getting a job done quickly, while not bothering to ask whether they had done it as safely as they could have. This is known as tacit approval, where the supervisor reinforces unsafe behavior by not asking nor saying anything when they suspect their workers are assuming inappropriate risk to get their jobs done.

The only way to dampen this voice is to demand accountability from the people who work for you. Think carefully about whether you unintentionally reward your workers for unsafe behavior and consider ways of giving “carrots” to those who do work safely, even if they take more time to get their jobs done.

### **My shortcut will always work**

Faster Easier leads humans to take shortcuts whenever possible. So, for every task we are faced with, we are immediately thinking about ways that we can reduce the time and effort required to complete the job. This may lead us to take shortcuts that could get the job done faster, but might also increase our risk.

Shortcuts are brain candy. When we get a job done more quickly or with less effort, we feel smarter than those who came up with the procedure we were supposed to follow. This also reinforces our resolve to “beat the system” anytime we can, as well as increasing our overall risk tolerance.

When we attempt a shortcut for the first time, we may not know for sure if it will work, so we watch carefully to make sure it doesn't go sideways on us. However, if we manage to pull it off and nothing bad happens, we immediately start down a slippery slope where we get comfortable and stop thinking about the risks we assume when we take that shortcut. Eventually, the time comes where a variable changes and an incident occurs.

Just because a shortcut has worked in the past, it doesn't mean it will always work. There are always variables that must align in your favor in order to successfully complete a task. If you get comfortable with a shortcut you've devised, your guard is lowered and you eventually stop asking “what could go wrong?” The voice of this belief is much louder now, making it more likely to drown out the still small voice of safety.

The people you work with could be the best antidote to this belief. Are you open to hearing outside opinions on your work practices? Think carefully about how you respond to your coworkers when they approach you with a safety concern. If you react negatively to a coworker's efforts to keep you safe, you are sending out a message that you aren't interested in other people's opin-

ions regarding safety. This could be your undoing, because your coworkers are going to withdraw from you and won't be there to serve as the voice of safety when you need them the most.

### **The rules are written in blood, but not MY blood!**

In other words, it won't ever happen to me. You can pretty much rest assured that anyone who has been injured or killed in the workplace had thought this at one time.

We often associate this belief with the youngest, least experienced workers, but that is a myth. The truth is that this thinking is rampant among workers of all ages, particularly those who haven't suffered loss due to a workplace injury. The majority of workers who get hurt or killed in workplace incidents are veterans, and in many cases they are within a few years of retirement.

It is sad to say that the most effective method for lowering the volume of this voice is a workplace incident that involves yourself or someone close to you. While this is the most effective method, it is certainly the least desirable. Do your best to learn from the mistakes of others through incident reports and personal stories shared by your coworkers. And, remember that a little humility goes a long way; never allow arrogance to overrule your personal voice of safety.

### **Someone other than me should be most concerned about my safety**

If this is one of your personal beliefs, I



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would pose this question to you. Who will suffer the most if you get hurt in a workplace incident? Anyone who says that their employer will be impacted more than themselves needs more information. Your employer will be set back on a financial level. However, you could lose everything that is important to you, I daresay everything that defines

you, if you don't work safely.

I would encourage you to do an audit of your personal safety beliefs. This could be a difficult exercise and will require brutal honesty on your part. However, the rewards can be great because purging beliefs that serve to compromise your personal safety will help you, your family and your coworkers prosper. **TM**