

The Slight Edge in Safety During Trying Times

By Carl Potter, CSP, CMC
CarlPotter.com

The struggle you're in today is developing the strength you need for tomorrow. Don't give up. ~ Robert Tew

Have you ever read an injury or fatality report and wondered, "How could this have happened?" Then you read an incident report that was a near-miss or first-aid, thinking, "...this could have been a lot worse"? Sometimes it seems like there was a line that was crossed one way or the other that created an outcome that was bad or good for the person or persons involved. In his book *The Slight Edge*, Jeff Olson discussed successful people and even unsuccessful people who have a small advantage.

One thing Olson noted is the slight edge can be a "thing you do" every time, every day consistently. One's edge comes from a personal philosophy. Henry Ford was attributed with saying, "If you think you can or you think you can't, you're right." Olson's philosophy goes beyond thinking; it goes to the actions that support one's thinking. He offers examples of how the actions we take consistently every day, even small ones, lead to the results we are after. He makes the case that these actions are in the direction of our thinking, therefore if we think we "can't" our actions will support that thinking and end in failure.

The Slight Edge Philosophy Applied to Safety

Olson provided a great "equation" that applies to the people who are the safest in the workforce.

The Right Philosophy > The Right Attitude > The Right Actions

Olson describes the attitude as a steppingstone from the philosophy to actions. It's not hard to imagine how one's actions will come about with a right attitude versus a wrong attitude. With the right philosophy but the wrong attitude a person would likely choose to take the wrong action to be safe, thereby increasing the risk of injury. Mix this with an oversight of not recognizing a hazard and an event leading to injury will more than likely occur. On the other side of the equation is the right attitude creating the right action which should lead to a lowered risk of injury.

Some may say, "Yes, but..." and my answer is, "Do you have the right attitude?" Certainly, there are cases in which wrong place, wrong time leads to injury – such as being a passenger, observer, or innocent bystander who is injured or killed. However, it is likely that the event occurred due to someone's slight edge in the wrong direction increasing the chances of a negative event in which others were affected. Consider the following cases:

1. A non-IFR (instrument flight rules) pilot files for IFR Clearance and is not qualified and kills his wife, daughter, and a fellow doctor in a private flight to a football game.
2. A supervisor who does not have proper personal protective equipment (PPE) is looking over the shoulder of one of his qualified electrical workers and is burned over 40% of his body when the switchgear faults.
3. An engineer goes into a circulation water system at the chemical injection point without following confined space procedures.
4. A lineman found dead and pinned under the dash of his truck after rolling off the side of the road (unknown why rollover occurred).
5. A worker opened the operation air supply valve to the servo on a 138 kv circuit breaker causing a slow close. Tank erupted setting oil on fire and the worker was subsequently burned to death.
6. Two teenagers were involved in a car rollover. The driver was the girlfriend of the passenger and she was not wearing a seatbelt and was ejected out the window and crushed to death. The boy in the passenger seat was wearing his seatbelt and was banged up and broke an arm but survived.



While you don't have a lot of details about each case, you can apply Olson's slight edge philosophy to decide for yourself if the person involved exhibited right actions that emanated from a right philosophy and a right attitude about safety. Think about what you can learn about your own philosophy, attitude, and actions. Could you find yourself in a similar circumstance? If you are a leader, consider how you can shape your own philosophy about safety and share it with others.

It Begins with the Right Philosophy

The right philosophy begins with values. A leader must first have a high value for safety. Our values tend to give us a course line to where we are headed. When it comes to a decision, we will decide based on our values or the perceived values of those to whom we report. A leader must have goals but even more a vision for the journey.

When a leader can see in their mind's eye what the journey looks like, they are more likely to talk about the journey and share it with others. A leader will communicate his or her values and visions for safety and demonstrate commitment to the journey through their actions – on a daily basis. This action will in turn create a following that goes beyond their formal team – it will be the leader's network.

“Network” can be a buzzword like the word “team.” The difference is that a network is stronger than a team because of the shared values among the members. A network is something that happens organically where a team is very organized to accomplish a specific goal. Both are similar but when it comes to a network the values that hold them together is stronger than a formal team roster. A network of people with shared philosophy and attitudes is, in effect, the safety culture of the organization.

Build Your Safety Culture with the Slight Edge

The current state of your safety culture exists in an environment because the environment allows a culture to survive or thrive. Take a reality check to determine if your safety culture is built on the right philosophy, right attitudes, and right actions. You may find that one or more of these is not where you want it to be. For this reason, you and your organization must begin your journey by creating an environment of trust where everyone can take personal responsibility for safety.

To create this environment, it is critical that everyone reset their mindset to understand that nobody in their organization wants to get hurt and nobody wants to see anyone get hurt. (If there are those who are emotionally unstable and do wish to get hurt or see others get hurt that must be taken care of at the start of the journey.)

Secondly, everyone in the organization must be willing to be held accountable to one another – for the attitudes and actions. Bear in mind that everyone makes mistakes, but many mistakes are avoided when everyone trusts and is trusted. Trust is built when interactive communication is respectful, honest, and open. Building trust takes the right attitude and consistent daily action first by leaders and then by followers.

A sustainable successful safety culture will thrive in an environment of trust where the traits of positive attitudes, responsibility, accountability are visible. The product of such traits create trust. So my questions to you are:

- What is your value for safety?
- How do you communicate a right philosophy supported by a right attitude to ensure right actions for reducing risk of incidents, events, and injuries in your workplace?
- What are your consistent personal actions that lead to others following you and joining your network?
- How do your communications to others reflect right values, vision, and commitment to creating a workplace where it is difficult to get hurt?
- Do you go reluctantly to a safety meeting or willingly go and sit with your network?

Safety in the workplace can be an elusive. You increase your ability to create a workplace where it's difficult to get hurt when you exercise the slight edge in safety through a right philosophy, right attitudes, and right actions.

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As we are going through these trying times keeping people safe at work has become a challenge. We have seen safety training head the way of recorded training that passes knowledge but may fail to pass understanding. Carl Potter would like to work with you to pass on understanding through his seminar ***Getting Back to the Basics of Staying Safe: Keep Safety Simple***. To learn more, contact Carl Potter at: carl@safetyinstitute.com

Carl Potter, founder and president of the Safety Institute, is a certified safety professional (CSP) and certified management consultant (CMC). He has owned his own business for 28 years and is a speaker, consultant, and workshop facilitator. He is the author of seven books, including *Conquest for Safety*.