Taboo, or Not Taboo

Dr Tim Marsh

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Taboo, or not taboo

The active peer-to-peer policing exercised at rugby matches offers some important and valuable lessons for the profession. Dr Tim Marsh explains how making behaviours taboo can transform workplace health and safety.
A man takes his 11-year-old daughter to a Wales v Argentina rugby match at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff. Wales play badly to the obvious frustration of many people around them. The daughter, however, doesn’t hear one swear word the entire day.

The purpose of this story is to introduce ‘taboo’ behaviours and how what is taboo in some circumstances (or organisations) isn’t in others. This is hugely interesting to a behavioural safety scientist because a ‘taboo’ is an extreme level of norm that delivers the very ‘nirvana’ of any behavioural safety process or cultural enhancement approach – that is, active peer-to-peer policing, as described in a value statement like “we always challenge”.

The truth for many is that they don’t challenge and the value statement is merely wishful thinking. For instance, the statement “at Bloggs Co we always intervene and say something when we see an unsafe act” might be more accurately written as “at Bloggs Co we sometimes intervene when we see an unsafe act although usually only if someone saw that we had seen it and even then not if we’re under time constraints”.

In SHP’s August 2013 issue I discussed how a 90 per cent compliance rate with a specific behaviour reaches a tipping point where the vast majority of new starts and sub-contractors will ‘go with the flow’ of ‘how we behave around here’ thus making the norm self-sustaining.

In contrast, a mere 50 per cent level of compliance leaves such contractors and new starts with a new choice – whatever they do they won’t stand out. This peer influence, though very welcome, is rarely active and works largely through the discomfort of standing out from a crowd. The mechanism involves meaningful looks, tutts, raised eyebrows, and perhaps good-natured teasing. Fewer, better rules clearly communicated

On the other hand, a ‘taboo’ is a level of norm that is so strong and valued that in the event of someone undertaking this behaviour they will almost certainly be actively challenged – as it says in the ‘company values’ document. For example, at the Millennium Stadium the norm is to be welcoming and friendly whether you win or lose.

Even in the latter situation, you’ll hardly ever see hostility or verbal aggression. If someone has got too upset (or drunk) and forgets themselves – as does happen from time to time – then without fail someone will lean forward, tap the miscreant on the shoulder and warn them to cut it out. On the rare occasions they don’t cut it out, their own side will alert the stewards to the problem. (In truth, I’m assured they do – I’ve seen only a handful of ‘taps’ in all my years and never seen one ignored).

The same is true of junior rugby. Occasionally, a player’s father will loudly offer a few choice remarks about the referee’s objectivity, competence or parentage. Again this is totally ‘taboo’ at junior rugby level and simply won’t be tolerated. Other parents will say something and insist the person cease or leave, while the referee will most probably stop the game. Resistance is futile as having two teams, a referee and all other spectators stop and unite against you is hard to do.

The point is that while swearing in the earshot of minors at a friendly international is considered uncouth, swearing at a high stakes Six Nations match is normal.

To define it, behaviours that are ‘taboo’ are things that just aren’t done, which of course is worth contrasting with the widely accepted “what’s typical around here” definition of culture.

Overriding a lock-out system, photocopying a risk assessment or signing a permit blindly in organisations where that simply isn’t done would be obvious safety examples, but about anything safety related on a nuclear submarine or at other genuinely high-reliability organisations would also fall under this category.

Finding out if a risky behaviour is indeed ‘taboo’ isn’t difficult with the right conversational approach – or even the wrong one. For example, I once challenged an operative at a quarry that he might be using a shortcut to get around detonation issues, and was met with a level of sincere indignation and incredulity. My provocative attempt to see how he’d react nearly provoked a punch on the nose and I needed to apologise afterwards for such a crude conversational gambit. I’d unjustly accused him of colluding in a behaviour that was taboo in that organisation.

The question is how do we achieve a ‘rugby crowd’ definition of active challenging that genuinely reflects the “we always challenge” definition in the files?

So how do we make behaviours taboo? The following list covers many of the key approaches to achieving world-class safety as a whole, but with specific reference to the issues caused by the high bar set by ‘taboo’.

Credible and data driven

The first issue is that some things don’t reflect actual risk based on hard data. For example, failing to hold the handrail on an oil platform may seem trivial to some but is hugely important as falls on stairs count for 50 per cent of all lost-time injuries at a cost of tens of millions to the industry annually.

Wearing hard hats in certain places and at certain times is also a ‘taboo’. However, wearing one in a field because of the ‘symbolism it sends out’ works both ways. Certainly it stresses safety is important to the company (a vital cultural building block). However, it also symbolises that some of our rules are silly at times, and ‘silly’ rules and an inviolate taboo mind-set are really not at all compatible.

Involvement and ownership

We can also avoid this lack of credibility with the active involvement of the workforce that will be subject to the rules. The US culture expert Aubrey Daniels said: “I will only impose an idea on someone that’s three times better than the one they came up with as I know they’ll work twice as hard on their own.”

As well as being genuinely risk driven we also have to confirm that the workforce genuinely perceives the risk too, as that’s not necessarily the same thing. This requires consultation and may require education

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too. It also needs an element of autonomy that involves trust. This has additional benefits, as trust – along with teamwork – is the key element of the ideal end of the Bradley Curve [Figure 1] (i.e. ‘interdependent’) and management certainly can’t engender trust in the workforce unless managers themselves demonstrate it. Of course, you can simply use ‘tell’ techniques loudly but the policing to make that effective will be considerable and will come with undesirable side effects like indignation.

Consult, coach and “sell” is much more effective; getting to ‘taboo’ needs genuine buy-in.

We will, of course, want to understand exactly why employees are not displaying these behaviours and why they’re reluctant to see them included as ‘golden’.

In SHP’s December 2010 issue I described the use of the ‘curious why’ question of anything untoward with the (‘Just Culture’ influenced) assumption that in the vast majority of cases there will be something that can be learnt.

We also want to ask: “Is there anything slow or uncomfortable about doing this job safely?” of any behaviours that we don’t, or can’t, see. We know from ABC – or ‘temptation’ – analysis that if the answer is yes, there will be a temptation to cut corners and that this will be given in to so we have no chance whatsoever of making this a ‘taboo’ behaviour.

At the very least we must demonstrate that we did everything viable to facilitate the behaviour required so that any eye-to-eye request for compliance is seen as fair; being ‘unfair’ is one of the biggest taboos.

Leadership

Finally, there’s leadership. As well as the commitment to genuinely analyse objectively and to invest in any changes required to facilitate behaviour, management must do two other things. First of all, managers must always undertake the behaviour themselves – absolutely always – as any failure to lead by example is closely correlated with the 50:50 free-for-all described earlier.

Second, management must always challenge anyone not performing the behaviour, else the phrase, “if we ignore it, we effectively condone it”, will apply.

A clash of taboos

The story of one of the most famous taboo breakers of all – Rosa Parks – shows how two strong taboos can clash at one space in time, but the better angels win out.

The first taboo was the one she broke when she refused to give up her seat on that bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1965, and was felt by huge numbers of Americans at that time to be the very definition of an ‘uppity …’ (You see? Even though that would have been an entirely historical reference, and this is very much in praise of Rosa, that unwritten word is now utterly taboo isn’t it? Things can change for the better.)

However, you might find it interesting to know that Rosa was not the first black woman to refuse to give up her seat on that bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1965, and was felt by huge numbers of Americans at that time to be the very definition of an ‘uppity …’ (You see? Even though that would have been an entirely historical reference, and this is very much in praise of Rosa, that unwritten word is now utterly taboo isn’t it? Things can change for the better.)

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However, you might find it interesting to know that Rosa was not the first black woman to refuse to give up her seat, but was instead the first who was well known in Montgomery society. When Rosa’s been arrested’ calls were made, people acted. She was on a lot of committees and made dresses for the children of the rich and privileged. This is really interesting for safety professionals, as studies have shown that we treat acquaintances as well, if not better, than friends.

The second taboo – although it may be pushing it a bit to call it a genuine taboo – is turning your back on people you know when they are in trouble. It’s just not done.
So the final way we make our desired behaviours taboo is to go out and talk to people about them and make these people acquaintances with this walk and talk process. While we're out there, if we need a behavioural promise, we can ask them to look us in the eye and use 'I' when they promise a behaviour, as studies show we are three times less likely to break that promise than if we can get away with a mumble into the ground.

You may wonder how a simple thing like that can impact on behaviour to a factor of three. The answer is that in our children's terminology that's a 'pinky promise'. That's not fobbing someone off or sliding out of something with clever wordplay; it's 'giving our word'. Breaking our word is taboo.

If I ever heard that a visiting rugby supporter had had a bad experience at the Millennium Stadium at the hands of rude, aggressive or hostile home fans, I'd be utterly mortified, just as the quarry worker was furious that I'd suggested he had cut any corners near explosives. Such mind-sets can't be conjured with a pen, they are hard won. If we want a key behaviour to be genuinely taboo rather than simply an item on a wish list, then in a variety of ways that reflect genuine management commitment, we'll have to graft to get there.

Then again, is that really very different to achieving anything else in life that's highly desirable and much cherished?

References

References for this article can be found with the online version at: www.shponline.co.uk/features/full/cpd-article-taboo-or-not-taboo

Dr Tim Marsh is managing director of Ryder-Marsh Safety Ltd – see page 4 for more details

QUESTIONS
1 A taboo can be described as:
   a) The way we do things around here
   b) Doing something we know we should do
   c) Something we just don't do
   d) Something we tell people not to do

2 The tipping point of ensuring a certain behaviour is exhibited can be considered to have been reached when the compliance rate has reached:
   a) 75 per cent
   b) 90 per cent
   c) 50 per cent
   d) 25 per cent

3 Taboos are a factor of:
   a) Social class
   b) Policy and procedures
   c) Disciplinary processes
   d) Culture

4 At work, examples of taboos could include: (tick all that apply)
   a) Not wearing a hard hat when the supervisor is watching
   b) Overriding a lock-out system
   c) Copying an existing risk assessment to cover a new situation
   d) Signing a permit without checking the controls are in place

5 In order to be credible, taboos must: (tick all that apply)
   a) Be applicable to all situations at work
   b) Be applicable to particular situations
   c) Be applicable to all blanket rules irrespective of their relevance
   d) Be relevant to hard data

6 To understand why people are not exhibiting desired behaviours it is helpful to: (tick all that apply)
   a) Consider if we have told people what to do often enough
   b) Consult the policies and procedures
   c) Consider if it is difficult to do the job safely
   d) Consider if enough has been done to facilitate the desired behaviour

7 The best approach to rules is:
   a) Ensuring there are plenty of rules to control behaviour
   b) Policing all rules irrespective of the situation
   c) Introducing more rules if existing ones are not followed
   d) Having fewer, but better, rules

8 In order to ensure compliance with rules, managers should: (tick all that apply)
   a) Tell people loudly what to do
   b) Police compliance with the rules at every opportunity
   c) Consult and educate the workforce
   d) Encourage an element of autonomy through trust

9 In order to lead, managers should: (tick all that apply)
   a) Always exhibit desired behaviours themselves
   b) Condone undesired behaviour when they think it appropriate
   c) Challenge anyone not exhibiting desired behaviours
   d) Demonstrate the behaviours themselves at least 50 per cent of the time

10 We can make undesired behaviours taboo by: (tick all that apply)
   a) Repeatedly telling people about them
   b) Making acquaintance with people through walk and talk processes
   c) Getting a quick agreement from people on them
   d) Ensuring eye contact is made when behavioural promises are made