

Awareness Does Not Equal Performance

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I have had some fierce encounters over awareness programs, campaigns and training. My position is that “awareness” efforts, as stand-alone initiatives, are a futile waste of money. This stance has caused me to endure emotional confrontations with safety directors, sales VPs, diversity managers, harassment professionals and even security folk. “You must make people aware!” they assert, bristling with passion. “It’s the only way to get things to change.”

My retort to this is a blunt, “Nonsense.”

Now for my rationale. Are you aware that people regularly go to bed hungry in the US or that alcohol is a major cause of highway deaths? Yes? Therefore? Smokers see dire warnings on cigarette packages. They are fully aware of the evils of smoking. So...?

In dealing with proponents of awareness ventures, my first question is, “What do you wish to accomplish?” Responses are either vague (“Well, uh...people should know. Things have got to change...”) or unrealistically specific (“We’ve got to have people become more security minded...like block views of their screens or documents aboard planes or change their passwords weekly.”). In every case, further probing ultimately draws out a fervent desire for changes in people behavior and results (e.g. switching off equipment and lights to reduce electrical consumption; noting sales opportunities to pass on while performing technical installations). In other words, the aim of awareness-raising initiatives is almost always desirable performance change.

What’s wrong with awareness? Nothing. Awareness is merely having knowledge of something. It is a registering of the senses. This is a necessary starting point for performance improvement. However, alone, it is insufficient to effect change except in limited situations such as knowing the locations of fire exits. Far more is required. What follows is an awareness-to-performance pathway with milestone states indicating where you can assist organizations to achieve what they seek when they turn to “awareness” solutions for altering behavior and results.

Awareness is the first milestone. Communications of all kinds can bring issues to the perceptual (awareness) level of the targeted population. To illustrate, let us turn to workplace safety. Imagine that the plant has experienced increased numbers of incidents, injuries and fatalities over the past two years. A recent safety violation resulted in several severe injuries and a fatality. Circulating information to everyone in a dramatic manner, complete with facts and figures

can trigger awareness. You can mandate that supervisors discuss the issue of working safely – no corner cutting. This is a start.

Acceptance is the second milestone. While awareness is possession of knowledge, acceptance internalizes this awareness, transforming it into something personally meaningful. In the safety instance, knowledge of the incident and tragic facts translate into recognition that “this could happen to me.”

Acknowledgement is the third critical state. Now, not only is there awareness of the issue and personal acceptance of the implications, but also an understanding that “I have a role to play.” In the safety case, workers acknowledge personal responsibility for maintaining a safe work environment.

Valuing is the next vital link in the chain from awareness to performance. By now, the message has sunk in. “We...I...ought to do something about it,” represents a leap from interested spectator to involved actor. In the safety example, workers express desire for something to happen. They are primed.

Action transforms abstract desire for change into actual activity. A commitment to act occurs. They admit that a personal action of some kind is worthwhile. Behaviors alter. With support, for example, workers examine their environment for potential safety hazards. They take new precautions. They become more diligent in the use of goggles and gloves. They inspect their work areas before leaving for the day.

Support means going beyond personal behavior to helping others. In the case of safety, workers inspect colleagues’ equipment and protective gear. They watch out for buddies or new-hires. They encourage discussion on improving plant safety. The impact on results is enormous.

Advocacy is the ultimate state in the awareness-to-performance journey. At this point, the transformation from aware bystander (“Yes, guys did get hurt or killed”) to proactive advocate, promoting desired change, is complete.

Breaking the awareness-to-performance pathway down into milestone states may make frighteningly complex what initially seemed to be simple. It is so much easier to create posters and provide so-called awareness training. Easier, but largely ineffective. The journey from passive awareness to active engagement resulting in valued accomplishment requires deep understanding of the transformational states along the way. Each state must be addressed and supported to obtain significant behavior and accomplishment changes. That is what performance improvement is all about.