

Dial the right safety channel

by David Sarkus

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You need to plan, assess, concentrate & evaluate to tune out dangerous distractions



I don't want to write about Willie and Joe in this article, but I do want to write about Joe Montana, a high school teammate of mine. As an athlete, Joe was really good at paying attention to the right kinds of things. There's little wonder why he's now enshrined in Pro Football's Hall of Fame.

Joe wasn't particularly big or strong, but was athletically gifted. However, I believe what separated Joe from others was his ability to tune into the "right channel" at the right time! Even as a high school quarterback, Joe had the unusual ability to scan the field and then focus on a second or third receiver to make a great completion. Under intense pressure, Joe was able block out distractions and make the right choices. He wasn't your typical high school quarterback. Joe also excelled at baseball and basketball. In all of these sports, Joe was able to slow the game down through his eyes and his mind — the game ran in slow motion for him as it does for many great performers. As he moved through his professional career, Joe relied more heavily on preparation, working within a system, assessing his weaknesses, and playing to his strengths. He had a strong mental game.

Same techniques apply

Take a moment to think about some of your workers, those who don't seem to be able to make the best decisions. You have systems in place, a pretty good safety culture, and you have a behavior-based safety process installed.

However, even with this type of support and external reinforcement, some people seem to make the same mistakes, which leads to the same kind of injuries, illnesses, and losses. I call this the "attention control gap." They slip, trip, or get a hand caught where it doesn't belong. You know — the isolated incidents that cause individuals like you to shake your head in disbelief and say, "What's wrong with these people?"

Well, mostly what's wrong is the fact that people don't always tune into the right channel at the right time. They get distracted by external events around them or by their own thoughts which hold

more interest. They like to tune into their own free movies! Also, these same people don't always switch between channels well enough in order to pay attention to what will keep them safe.

A system to understand safety channels

What are these channels and how many are there? There are three basic channels that can be summarized in a system I've refined, called The P.A.C.E. Safety System™. Initially, there may appear to be four channels but you'll see how this comes full circle. Through this system, individuals are first assessed to determine their strongest and weakest channels and are taught how to use each of them to remain safe. Learning activities are reinforced through various tactics, and when appropriate, behavioral definitions are created for current BBS inventories. This system is scientifically based and has shown great results.

Three channels working together

The first channel involves Planning to work safely. Planning is about going upstairs, between your ears, to prepare for your work. It involves thinking about the steps within a given task. For example, what materials, tools, equipment, procedures, and people are needed to get a job done effectively? Evidence of good planning can be seen when someone is using all that is needed to get the job accomplished safely. However, some people get into trouble when they remain on this channel too long or when another channel should be used in its place. Workers also make "attentional errors" when they begin planning for other activities not relevant to the task at hand — like going fishing after work or picking up a child after school.

The second channel involves Assessing and helps you better understand what's going on around you. Assessing involves regularly scanning your environment for hazards and cues that will help keep you safe. Assessing your distance to moving equipment like forklifts becomes critical if you work in an environment that's somewhat congested. Skilled workers know the importance of checking their proximity to others, or to equipment around them, so they can make adjustments regarding their position or the position of someone nearby. Assessing and scanning on a regular basis also allows workers to check for unusual noises, smells, sights, and sounds and to make adjustments.

The third channel involves Concentrating, which ultimately deals with your focus on things near to you or in the distance.

Think about golfing. You have to concentrate on the ball when it's on the tee, but also quickly move your concentration to the hole, at a distance. The same thing has to occur in various jobs — concentrating with your "eyes and hands" on a task very near to you, and away from you in the distance. You then have to switch between different channels and back to a near-point of concentration.

Here's the other component of the first channel but on the opposite end of the continuum. This component involves Evaluating. When you quickly evaluate what you're doing on a job task or what you've just done, you're going back "upstairs" to think about how you may need to do the job in a safer way. Informally, you begin to recognize certain steps you may have left out, or the chances you've taken by not using a specific tool or type of PPE. In essence, you're self-correcting your work habits as you go.

You can test it, too

Think about these channels the next time you drive to work. Which do you remain on too long to your detriment or to those around you? Can you recall what you saw during your commute to work or home? Were you in a "dangerous mental zone" that left the details more than a little fuzzy?

You use these channels every day, but your safety and the safety of others relies on your ability to tune into the right channel and constantly shift between channels to optimize your personal safety. It's the attention control gap — and Joe knew how to close it!

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