COVID-19

The Personal Battle with Critical Errors and Complacency Drift

By Larry Wilson

Anthony walked back to his office and put the large print down on his desk. It was only then that it hit him and he realised what he had done. Three quick thoughts flashed through his mind in seconds. And why couldn't he have thought about all this a couple minutes ago?

What happened was that he needed to get something printed on the big printer. Their businesses were almost all deemed essential services, so the corporate office was also open. But nobody, or hardly anybody was ever there. They were all working from home. But Anthony was there every day. He was in charge of the company's response plan for COVID globally. This was the 7th epidemic he had been in charge of. So, when he walked down the hall with no mask or gloves on, it wasn't because he didn't know. His next thought was, "thankfully nobody saw me!" And the third thought that flashed across his mind was, "what if I forgot my PPE when I had to get out of the limo at the press conference!" That all happened – those three thoughts – in a couple of seconds. At least that's what he told me. The next part, where he had to go wipe down the door handles, the keypad on the photocopier, the sides of the copier, the tray where he touched it getting the print, what else? Inside doorknob. Was more than two seconds and a

fair bit of work, or effort – all to correct one little mistake.

So, when he told the story to an audience of around 500 safety professionals at a local event, the point he was trying to get across was that even if you're not in denial, and you have lots of experience, you can still make mistakes. And like almost everyone else in safety and health, it's always: easier, cheaper, faster and better to prevent the incident in the first place, then it is to clean it up later. And obviously with COVID, if someone gets sick and dies there's no fixing it later. There were two other expert panelists on a recent webinar I was hosting, who also had stories of errors and close calls in terms of contact. In their case, just like Anthony, it wasn't because they didn't know or that they were in denial, they just made an error or mistake.

But before we get into the Critical Error Reduction Techniques that could've prevented all three incidents those panelists experienced, let's look at denial. Because it's a natural thing or a universal tendency among people to not want to believe that things have changed for the worse, not for the better. Which makes them wish things could go back to being the way they were instead of the way they are. Which, loosely translated means, I don't want to change because it means that I "accept" that things have changed for

real if I do! But here's the point: things have changed for real. It's like 9/11. It changed air travel all over the world, for what will most likely be forever. With this virus, it has also changed the world, for what will likely be until we get a vaccine (2021?). So, while denial is natural, it's also a very dangerous position to take.

It's one thing to be cavalier about your own health. It's another thing altogether to have to say sorry to somebody for getting them sick or for your child to have been the one who got them infected!

The reason for discussing denial is that there's really no sense trying to teach people how to avoid unintentional contact with the virus, if you know they won't even make the effort to try to wash their hands more often. And that's just one habit. Working on safety related habits is only one of the four **Critical Error Reduction Techniques** people will need to fight this virus on a personal basis.

So, let's just start with "**Work on Habits**". The idea here is that you can't stop complacency from leading to mind not on task if someone is familiar (enough) with the task or job, or even the drive home from work. When your mind wanders your behaviour defaults to "auto-pilot" or what you do habitually with your subconscious mind. So even if you're not really thinking about what you're doing, or the risk of what you're doing, your
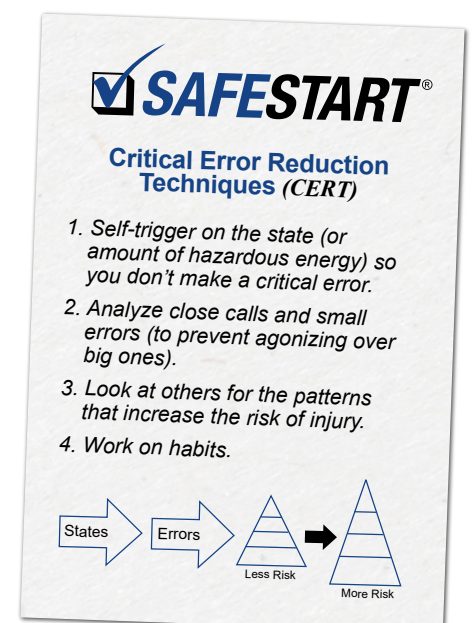
automatic or habitual behaviour will compensate for it (like leaving a safe following distance on the highway).

One of two things will happen:

1. There will be a rebound – and there will be another lockdown.

2. There will be a rebound – and many people will die.

But unfortunately, that's it. There are only two options. So hopefully denial isn't going to be a "culturally insurmountable obstacle". Nothing's impossible.

However, if your people are willing to make the effort, or if you have to make them make the effort because you simply can't afford (another) outbreak at one of your facilities, then getting your folks to put some real effort into improving their habits will be the best or perhaps the most efficient place to start. And

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Critical Error Reduction Techniques *(CERT)*

1. *Self-trigger on the state (or amount of hazardous energy) so you don't make a critical error.*
2. *Analyze close calls and small errors (to prevent agonizing over big ones).*
3. *Look at others for the patterns that increase the risk of injury.*
4. *Work on habits.*

States → Errors → Less Risk → More Risk

when it comes to "prompting" new behaviours like washing your hands more often, or for longer, then visual reminders, like little posters or tent cards by the sink or where people are likely to see them, can be a big help.

Another technique that will also be a big help is to be able to **Self-trigger on the State** (like rushing) so you don't make a critical error. With invisible hazards, like viruses, we can't see them, so we won't get the benefit of our reflexes. This means that mind on task will be even more important. However, human factors or states like rushing, frustration and fatigue can easily take your mind off task if there's enough "baseline complacency" in the situation already.

However, because we can tell when we're rushing, or when we're frustrated or tired (fatigue) these states are much easier to recognise in the moment compared to something like complacency. So as soon as you realise you're rushing or going faster than you normally go or doing more things at once than you normally do, then you need to self-trigger or come back to the moment and think about what you're doing. Keep your eyes on task and think about line-of-fire and what could cause you to lose your balance, traction or grip. Just being able to do that:

Self-trigger quickly enough to prevent making a critical error like moving into the line-of-fire or

somehow losing your balance, traction or grip... That technique combined with working on habits most likely would have reduced your injuries (or mine, or his, hers or anybody else's) by a huge percentage.

Self-triggering is easy enough to understand, unfortunately, it's difficult to do in the moment, unless you've spent some time training yourself or in training sessions to be able to come back to the moment quickly enough to prevent the error. Or as Kevin Cobb (one of the first SafeStart's consultants) said, "**knowing that rushing is a risk isn't much of a trick. Knowing that rushing is a risk when you're in a rush... that's a heck of a trick!**" And now there's neuroscience to back up what Kevin said. But the point is, it's not as simple as it seems. It takes training and practice (we just try to make it less boring than old-school arithmetic or Kumon) but it's the same principle: repetition until reflex or reflexive response. (e.g. "What's 3x4?"). It's also the same principle they use for coaching sports. There are a lot of chemicals that get released in your brain when you're in a rush, or you're frustrated or tired, or how about all 3 at once after a long day at work, traffic on the way home and a set time for dinner? So, it takes training and practice to control them.

But self-triggering and working on your safety and health related habits, won't be enough.

Self-triggering is great for rushing, frustration and fatigue, but it's difficult to recognise complacency in the moment, so self-triggering won't be much help for complacency. Working on your habits will help to compensate for complacency leading to mind not on task, but it's always better if you're thinking about what you're doing because your response time is that much quicker. However, with something like COVID, we have to be thinking first before we get too close or before we touch something we shouldn't, or before we touch our eyes or mouth. So, it would be really useful if we had a way to help people pull their mind back into the moment. And that's where the 3rd technique comes in. When you **Look at Others for the (State-to-Error) Patterns that Increase the Risk of Injury**, if you see risk (someone coughing but not into elbow), you will likely think about the risk to you, which brings you back to the moment, which would likely be enough to remind you about anything else you needed, like gloves or a mask. So, this technique, where you look for state-to-error risk patterns, will be a big help when you're not in a really big rush or frustrated or fatigued but you're complacent enough for your mind to wander.

And then the last technique is to give your employees a way to continually improve, without having to learn the hard way. There will always be more

potential contacts than actual contacts. And there will be more contacts than infections. And thankfully more infections than fatalities. The easiest, best and cheapest – in terms of not paying the ultimate price – would be to pay attention to the very bottom of this pyramid. And at an individual level, **Pay Attention to all the Close Calls**, the things we touched that we shouldn't have, etc. What states were we in? If it was rushing, frustration or fatigue then we needed to self-trigger or self-trigger more quickly next time. But if it was mostly complacency leading to mind not on task, then it's probably a safety-related or health-related habit that still needs more work. Or, we will need to put more effort into

watching what other people do and looking for patterns of risk. For example: if you see someone sneeze into their hand, and then you see what they touch; it will help to remind you (and motivate you) to not touch what they have touched.

However, when dealing with invisible and contagious hazards like viruses, the four critical error reduction techniques won't be enough. There are still concepts, like fail-safe and redundancy where we should be looking for opportunities, especially with near-misses and close calls. There is also the need for "deliberate practice" so that these skills and habits can be

learned, adopted and stopped as quickly as possible. But we'll get to that another time. Four critical error reduction techniques plus dealing with the potential for a lot of "denial" is a lot to contend with for now, and we'll all know a lot more in a couple weeks. Things are changing every day. But the reality of the situation is that things are not going back to normal soon, so unfortunately, we all will still be dealing with it, which means we will need even more tools or more ammunition to fight this virus and keep ourselves safe.

Hope this much at least helps for now.

About the Autor

Larry Wilson is a pioneer in the area of Human Factors in safety. He has been a behaviour-based safety consultant for over 25 years and has worked on-site with hundreds of companies worldwide. He is also the author of SafeStart, an advanced safety and performance awareness programme, successfully implemented in more than 3,500 companies, in over 60 countries, with more than 3,5 million people trained.

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