**Safety coaching and safety training: What’s the difference?**

Safety coaches tends to be more intimate, more one-on-one, more private than safety trainers, who usually present themselves before a group of workers. Think of elite athletes and their personal coaches. It is a tight bond. Trust and respect are important. Few people come between a coach and his or her pupil.

Training tends to focus on imparting technical knowledge, perhaps OSHA compliance knowledge, such as how to enter a confined space or how to lockout and/or tagout de-energized machinery, or what type of respirator to wear when exposed to certain chemicals.

Training can also 1) orient new hires to the company’s safety rules and protocols; 2) bring employees into a deeper understanding of psychological issues such as safety attitudes, beliefs and perceptions; 3) teach employees behavior-based observation and feedback techniques; 4) offer annual “refresher reminders” of various safety requirements, such as reporting incidents, near-misses and hazardous conditions; and 5) teach employees broad, new subjects such as sustainability, and ways of reducing energy consumption, purchasing sustainable safety gear, such as a new “green” hard hat made from sugar cane, and recycling practices.

Training can be conducted in a classroom, perhaps using DVDs, or using online computers and simulations – or a blend of both. Certain types of training requires “hands on” demonstrations, such as how to operate a fire extinguisher or administer CPR or operate an AED. Sometimes training occurs on a large scale, such as practicing fire drills and evacuation procedures.

**A coaching misconception**

In comparison, coaching is often more personal, focusing on one employee or a small group of employees. There is still exists some residual stigma that coaching is somehow remedial, corrective, as in, “That fellow needs more coaching to get in line.” That does occur when behaviors are truly dysfunctional and need to be identified and worked on.

But many times coaching focuses on personal development, where the emphasis is on teaching, encouragement and skills building. This can take the form of a short, impromptu one-on-one private chat, or regularly scheduled sessions that cover subjects such as conflict management, listening, planning, communication, team building, decision making, empathy, delegating, mentoring, persuasion, interpersonal skills and motivational skills.

One erroneous assumption is coaches are called in to fix weaknesses or problems, while trainers are on board for regularly scheduled topical or technical sessions, a number of which may be mandatory by law. These are ill-defined, confining stereotypes. Coaching can be highly motivational, inspiring, and supportive. Training can go far beyond OSHA compliance or how to clean a self-contained breathing apparatus. Training can add value to a culture of safety by interpreting a company’s safety vision for employees and challenging employees to suggest ways to implement the vision. A training class filled with high-energy interactivity can product employees motivated to take on new safety responsibilities.

Can a safety coach be a safety trainer? Can a trainer be a coach?

Yes, because both coaches and trainers are teachers and communicators. They have good inter-personal skills. They listen, probe and prod. Generally, they like and are turned on by people. They are “people people.” Both face situations where they must be firm and perhaps disciplinarians.

In many cultures of safety, the safety manager or director will act as both a coach and a trainer for employees.

But there can come a point where the two roles diverge. Certain high-level or very specific training can require a special subject matter expert, such as when training in arc flash protection and flame-resistant clothing fabric selections. In the same way, high-level safety leadership coaching involving CEOs or other top executives, perhaps instituted after a high-profile accident uncovers organizational system and decision-making flaws, will require the skills and sophisticated diplomacy of an executive coach.

Sometimes personality enters into the picture. Some individuals are simply more comfortable as coaches; they are good conversationalists and enjoy discussing the mental aspect of a sport, an executive’s job, or safety performance. Others enjoy being in front of a group, perhaps they are charismatic, and they make training fun with their cleverness, humor and energy.