I was privileged to be invited to address an audience recently at one of the global TED conferences. (If you’re not already familiar with the TED concept, visit my website to view a clip of a previous TED talk I have given.)

The overarching theme for the event was perpetual (r)evolution. As I researched and wrote my talk, I found myself exploring the difference between revolution and evolution. The more I read, thought, and wrote, the more I began to notice stark differences between the two concepts.

My conclusions led me to the point where I felt that revolution was like a wheel rotating around a central axis. Spinning around and around, the wheel essentially retains the same shape, size and function.

On the other hand, evolution implies a sense of forward progress. Whether we think of the evolution of mankind, mobile telephones or approaches to safety, it’s clear that standing still is not an option.

Evolution and revolution can have starkly different definitions, depending on one’s perspective.

A CHANGE FOR GOOD

Glorious South Africa certainly is a country of change. Between the early 1960s and the late 1980s, the study of South African history underwent a transformation, which, in historiographical terms, represents a revolution.

The long overdue “Africanisation” of South African history, coupled with a shift away from an ethnocentric approach, has led to enormous advances in knowledge of the previously neglected history of the African societies of the country.

South African history is no longer displayed within the contexts of a white-settler society or as a historical adventure of European expansion overseas. Instead, over the years, it’s moved through a process of being assimilated into the history of the African continent.

As a result, none of the several short histories of South Africa that became popular towards the end of the last century begin with the Portuguese voyages of discovery, or the Dutch settlement at Cape Town in 1652, but rather with the history of the African people of the area.

The subject matter of South African historical research has also continued to change and diversify. As just one example, the discovery of diamonds at Kimberley and gold on the Witwatersrand in the 1860s and 70s became one of the fastest and most amazing industrial revolutions in world history.

Looking back, the social, economic and political repercussions of this revolution have dominated South Africa’s history ever since.

In the late 1980s, when growing resistance to apartheid was met with brutal repression, leaders including Nelson Mandela and FW de Klerk stepped up to the plate and opted for a negotiated settlement rather than the path of destruction and civil war.

Fast forward to the present day and we see how the impact of the evolution (not revolution), involving leaders such as Mandela and De Klerk, has fundamentally changed the game.

What do Nelson Mandela, FW de Klerk, Charles Darwin, Tracy Chapman and a 15-year-old boy yelling “Eureka!” have in common? And just what can we learn from them about safety culture? Professor ANDREW SHARMAN explains all.
After more than 20 visits to South Africa in the last 15 years, my own personal experiences of this magnificent country conclude that it is one of the most open societies in the world; a place where I truly feel welcome and “at home”.

However, the potential for revolution is again potentially high, due to a falling economy and political unrest. Which way will the country now go? And what lessons can we learn of such (r)evolutions that may benefit us in workplace safety?

IT SOUNDS LIKE A WHISPER

In 1988, African-American singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman had a hit with the track *Talkin’ bout a Revolution*. In the same year, she performed the track in Nelson Mandela’s 70th birthday tribute, an event which raised significant sums of money for South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement and several children’s charities.

While the song lamented the troubled times of those at the poorer end of the social scale, Chapman’s message reflected De Klerk and Mandela’s more subtle – yet high-impact – approach to change: “Don’t you know, they’re talkin’ bout a revolution. It sounds like a whisper.”

Chapman’s words of a “quiet revolution” certainly encouraged social evolution, just as those of Mandela, De Klerk and others before her had done. Her gentle persuasion inspired confidence, encouraged thought and empowered people to take action.

CHANGE IS THE NEW NORMAL

Whether we like it or not, as human beings we are constantly changing, day after day after day. Change is a constant. As Charles Darwin pointed out back in 1859, “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent ... it is the one that is the most adaptable to change.”

Darwin’s *Theory of Evolution* was a revelation rather than a revolution. He had cracked the nut and his advice resonates to this very day. And it’s so true when it comes to safety – it’s not about being pushy and using a hierarchy to tell workers to “be safe”. It’s rather about adapting to the climate and enabling growth.

EVOLUTION OR REVOLUTION?

So how can we help more of our species to survive? What does all this mean for workplace safety? How can we prevent our safety efforts from spinning around the same point? Are we talkin’ bout a revolution, or a more subtle, balanced and whispered evolution?

I suggest it’s the latter. Workplace safety has evolved over the last 40-or-so years. Since the publication of the Health and Safety at Work Act of 1974 in Great Britain, legislators in many countries around the world have emulated that legislation and enshrined a similar approach. We, too, must evolve our approach to managing safety at work.

Taking a leaf out of Darwin’s great book, I propose that there are four key elements on which we must focus our attention:

**Encourage** – Think about your own choices in life. Why do you do the things you do? I’ll hazard a guess that there is almost always something that motivates you to take certain action. Now think about some of the new or unusual activities you’ve undertaken recently – perhaps you learned a new language, took up a new sport or hobby, stopped smoking, or visited a country or city you’d never dreamed of going to before.

What caused you to do this? Perhaps there was some specific encouragement from someone or something that provided the initial motivation to act. In the workplace it goes the same way: without encouragement, people simply won’t do some of the necessary things. Gentle encouragement is an effective way to focus attention on what’s required and get folks ready to move in the right direction.
Engage – My Canadian friend Alan Quilley specialises in driving a step change in safety across the shop floor. One of my favourite lines from Al’s repertoire is: ‘You just can’t deliver safety like a pizza in a box!’ Never a truer word said!

We just cannot ‘do safety’ to people. The only route to success is to engage people and work with them to identify challenges, solutions and approaches. It continues to amaze me just how many organisations invest huge amounts of time, money and resources developing very sophisticated safety improvement programmes, campaigns and tools – almost in secret within the health and safety department – only to be met with a lack of take-up by their workers.

Enable – Once we have gained the attention of our audience, encouraged them to get involved and then obtained their commitment to engage with us, we need to equip them with the skills, knowledge and tools to enable them to work in safety. Enabling people isn’t about telling them what to do, it’s about building the competence and confidence to allow them to understand how do it for themselves.

Empower – We learn something from everything we do, and we use this knowledge as we face the next challenge or action that crosses our path. When things go well, or bring us positive results, we tend to repeat these successful actions. Generating the space to allow people to practise what we’ve asked of them is crucial.

Eureka!

Just a few years after Darwin presented his theory, in 1867, while working on his father’s farm on the banks of the Orange River, 15-year-old Erasmus Jacobs spotted a ‘transparent rock’. Young Erasmus had located South Africa’s very first diamond – and he quickly made history.

When the local free press enquired about the discovery, the boy shared his secret: he had been encouraged by his father to believe that such precious rocks existed. Wise old Mr Jacobs supplied the boy with a simple pick and shovel, showed him how to use them, and sent him off.

Day after day Erasmus would return with little to show for his efforts, until one day a tiny glinting speck of rock was presented at the family’s table. The praise heaped on Erasmus catalysed his commitment and off he went again, day after day, until the 21-carat, 4.25-gram Eureka Diamond was found.

Two decades after her quiet revolution, looking back on her influence on human rights and socialism, Tracy Chapman reflected: ‘I’m fortunate that I’ve been able to do my work and be involved in certain organisations, certain endeavours, and offered some assistance in some way. Whether that is about helping to raise awareness or just being another body to show some force and conviction for a particular idea; finding out where the need is – and if someone thinks you’re going to be helpful, then helping.’

Chapman got involved, and research confirms that there is a far stronger correlation between worker involvement in safety and incidence rates than there is between compliance and incidence rates.

Compliance and control – even revolutionary – is not sufficient to reach zero accidents. We need to evolve our thinking and find ways to encourage people to get involved, engage them fully, enable them to work in safety, and empower them to take action. Creating a great safety culture requires evolution, not a revolution.  

Sharman on Safety is based on ideas and concepts from Andrew Sharman’s new book: From Accidents to Zero: a practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture. Andrew is an international member of the South African Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (SAIOSH) and the Chief Executive of RMS - consultants on leadership and cultural excellence to a wide range of blue-chip corporates and non-government organisations globally. More at www.RMSsuisse.com.