

Behavior-Based Safety

Can you change your employees' attitudes toward safety?

By Lana Straub

What if your business had the capability of reducing all losses, including injuries, property damage, and operational inefficiencies? What if your company could start a program that would actually *change* your employees' attitudes toward safety?

Would you use it?

What if I told you that such programs already exist and are being used by companies around the country? Even though it is called by many different names, these myriads of programs all have the same basic concepts at their core. Control your employees' attitudes toward safety issues and you will produce employees who behave safer. The concept is called behavior-based safety. Give your employees tools that help identify and eliminate the factors and behaviors that lead to injuries, property damage, and other loss — and the ability to control them — and they will become safer, more productive employees.

Is behavior-based safety for every company? Is it right for your company at this stage in its growth?

This article will examine the pros and cons of behavior-based safety, how the concept is sweeping our industry, and its potential to change the way we all do business.

Traditional Safety Programs

Traditional safety programs put the responsibility of accident prevention and safety coordination on the shoulders of upper management in each company. Upper management generally has to designate a person to act as safety coordinator and, depending on the size of the company, a group of people to act as the safety team. This person or team has the designation and the responsibility to ensure a safe working environment is present for all employees at their company at all times. Creation and implementation of rules and regulations falls on these managers. The all-familiar tailgate meetings and the monthly safety seminars also are the creation and implementation of these upper-level managers. Oftentimes, these safety coordinators are supervisors in the field. Sometimes they are not.

What happens when the employees return to the field and forget their safety meeting training, or become reckless, or seem to do everything in their power to ignore the safe working environment you as the employer have created? We all know what happens. Accidents happen.

Behavior-Based Safety Programs

What if there was a way to make your accident-prone employee responsible for his or her own



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actions? Wouldn't it be great if you could find a way to change the behavior of your reckless employees and put an end to their Lone Ranger attitudes?

Now you can.

Behavior-based safety is a system that claims to equip companies with the tools they need to change employees' behaviors and attitudes toward safety. Behavior-based safety systems educate employees to search for the root causes of their accident-prone behavior. It teaches them to realize trends of behaviors that cause them to succumb to safety hazards. It transfers the control of the incident into the hands of the employee. The employee then becomes proactive toward his own safety and less of a victim of the circumstances of his surroundings.

Through anonymous observation of others, each employee is allowed to report unsafe behaviors to their employer without any immediate ramifications to the violating employees. The observed behaviors are documented and discussed in meetings so that everyone can have a safer environment.

Growing in Popularity

Behavior-based safety programs are growing in all industries across the board, but they are becoming more prevalent in the construction sectors, especially for those of us who work for environmental consulting firms, municipalities, and as subcontractors for larger construction firms. Even the federal government uses behavior-based safety programs.

Good Practices for the Behavior-Based Safety Process, a handbook published in 2003 by the U.S. Department of Energy, states:

DOE sites are employing a growing number of behavior-based safety (BBS) processes, each with its own specific orientation and techniques. Despite these variations, all BBS processes have four major components: (1) investigation of the antecedents to at-risk behavior; (2) the observation process; (3) action plans to influence at-risk behaviors and conditions; and (4) feedback.

Even though behavior-based safety programs are growing in popularity, it is difficult to do your own research on them. Behavior-based safety programs are a niche market and several companies have their own methods to the madness. There isn't much information out there that is not proprietary. If you want to read their information, you must either join their program or attend expensive seminars to glean what these programs are and what they propose to offer your company.

I did find one source of information that was both free and useful. The U.S. Department of Energy promotes behavior-based safety and has extensive resources on its Web site to help you learn more about the process and whether your business wants any part of it. In most instances, a client will tell you that you must become involved in this program or be forced out of the market. At that point, you need to stop and weigh the pros and cons of joining.

Five Core Functions of Integrated Safety Management

1. Define the Scope of Work

To develop and maintain a BBS process, you must follow several steps to define the scope of the work:

- Form assessment team(s).
- Extract behaviors that were involved in past accidents/incidents.
- Develop definitions that describe the safe behavior.
- Compile data sheet using identified behaviors.
- Determine observation boundaries.
- Train observers.
- Gather data.
- Determine barrier removal process.
- Form barrier removal teams.

2. Analyze the Hazards

Analyzing hazards is built into the BBS process. Hazards are analyzed during each observation, and the worker observed receives immediate feedback on how to minimize the risk. The assessment team and barrier removal team analyze the data gathered through observations to determine workplace hazards. The teams then develop action plans to remove barriers to safe work.

3. Develop and Implement Hazard Controls

Employees tasked with planning or designing work can also use the behavior assessment and data. By studying the definitions and data, barriers that could require a worker to perform at-risk behaviors can be "designed out" up front. This forethought makes the workplace a much safer environment.

4. Perform Work Within Controls

Although work has been designed and training conducted to help the employee know how to work safely, bad habits and shortcuts can introduce at-risk behaviors into the workplace. The ongoing observation process encourages the continued use of safe behaviors and reminds workers that one at-risk behavior could cause an accident, injury, or even fatality.

5. Provide Feedback and Continuous Improvement

Feedback is provided each time an observation is performed. The feedback process reinforces the use of safe behaviors and helps determine why certain at-risk behaviors were performed. Collecting information about the at-risk behaviors helps the teams determine the root cause of a behavior and develop an action plan to remove the barrier causing the behavior.

Provided by the U.S. Department of Energy handbook *Good Practices for the Behavior-Based Safety Process*

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Behavior-based safety programs are not free. The training is ongoing and can become quite expensive.

The Pros

Here are some of the advantages touted by the creators and promoters of behavior-based safety programs.

1. The worker is responsible for his or her own safety.
2. Teaching off-the-job safety leads to on-the-job safety.
3. Proactive attention to near-loss situations leads to safety records with zero losses.
4. Because behavior-based safety is non-punitive, it gives the employees positive reinforcement for being safe.
5. Behavior-based safety gives the employees control over their environment and control over their safety.
6. The program teaches stewardship of company property and ensures management quality checks of equipment to make sure that a safe working environment is maintained.
7. Investigating all losses and near-loss incidents saves the company money because the company learns what types of behaviors cause the losses and corrects them.
8. No amount of money can replace an injured or killed worker.
9. "Safety is no accident." Businesses must plan to be safe.
10. Behavior is observable and measurable. At-risk behaviors must be observed, measured, and feedback given to change them.

The Cons

Here are some of the disadvantages I have heard from contractors who have implemented behavior-based safety programs in their establishments.

1. Employers cannot watch over an employee every hour of the day. If employees do not take their training to heart, they will continue to be unsafe.
2. More paperwork equals less drilling/pump installation time and less productivity in your day.
3. Instead of being proactive, employees become inactive, always trying to make sure their work environment is safe.

Tooling Up

Seven Guiding Principles of Integrated Safety Management

1. Line Management Responsibility for Safety

The responsibility for safety and the BBS process is shared by management and front-line workers. All levels of the organization are involved in an effective BBS process.

2. Clear Roles and Responsibilities

Functions within the BBS process are performed at the proper level and are integrated and adapted to fit the formal organization itself.

3. Competence Commensurate with Responsibilities

An effective BBS process provides the skills needed to perform the tasks and functions associated with the job in a timely manner, provides the opportunity to use those skills on a regular basis, and provides for coaching and interaction with other people and organizations using the BBS process.

4. Balanced Priorities

BBS provides the consistent stream of safety data that enables managers to balance safety

priorities with production and other operational needs.

5. Identification of Safety Standards and Requirements

Existing safety standards and requirements aid in developing the list of behaviors and definitions used in the BBS process.

6. Hazard Controls Tailored to Work Being Performed

The observation process provides ongoing monitoring of processes so that hazard controls reflect the risks associated with work being performed in changing environments and conditions.

7. Operations Authorization

The BBS process helps provide the behavior-related safety information necessary to make informed decisions prior to initiating operations.

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4. Management and employees are saddled with additional paperwork to add to their already hectic day.
5. Large companies with dedicated safety staffs try to force their ideas on small companies whose managers already juggle many tasks.
6. Investigating near-loss incidents costs the company money because the company must redirect man-hours to learn what types of behaviors cause the losses and correct them.
7. The program is expensive to get into and the upkeep of the training materials is expensive.
8. The company has to designate a specific person in the company to be in charge of and implement the program.
9. The observation portion of the program is time consuming and serves no purpose because of the "no names and no blame placed" philosophy. Workers are shown that there are no consequences for their actions.

10. The only solution behavior-based safety provides for a habitually unsafe employee is termination.

Despite the opposition raised by contractors, data has shown behavior-based safety programs are effective in lowering injury rates in the construction industry. What the studies do not show is how shortened the workday has become or how long projects have been extended past deadlines due to the additional paperwork and meetings involved. The old adage of time is money comes into play whether we want it to or not.

Ultimately, you know what is best for your business and you have to decide what programs to implement there. Can you or any program and its ideals actually change your employees' attitudes toward safety? [WWJ](#)