

Behavior-Based Safety: A New Way to Augment Your Safety Program

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Gather together any group of people and ask everyone to stand if they have ever had to climb on something to reach an object, change a light bulb, paint or do some other chore. Most everyone will stand. Now ask them to sit if they have NEVER used a chair, stool, table or other inappropriate object instead of getting a step stool or ladder. Almost everyone will remain standing. Ask them to sit if they have NEVER performed an unsafe action while on a ladder like 'walking' the ladder, standing on the very top rung, or over-reaching to one side. Most will still remain standing. Ask if any of them have ever been seriously injured because of unsafe behavior on a ladder or step stool. Maybe one or two at most will sit down, but it is quite possible that everyone will still remain standing. Now ask how many knew that they were acting unsafely at the time. Suddenly, everyone is sitting.

For the most part, people know when they are taking unnecessary risks, and yet they do so anyway. Safety experts have been studying this phenomenon for the last 20-30 years and have come up with an explanation of why so many people take risks even when they know better, and how organizations can overcome the obstacles which keep their safety programs from being effective. The approach is called Behavior-Based Safety and it addresses the reasons people choose unsafe behaviors over safe behaviors even when they know better and they have all the resources they need to do things correctly.

Having the necessary resources before embarking on a Behavior-Based Safety Program is a fundamental prerequisite. Engineering out identified hazards is still the most effective weapon in a safety manager's arsenal because it eliminates the opportunity for unsafe behaviors or conditions in the first place. When hazards cannot be completely eliminated, then a safety program with personal protective equipment, safety procedures, policies, and training are the next line of defense.

Unfortunately, even the best safety programs have a critical weakness. Employees must choose to comply with the program each and every time they do their jobs. Why wouldn't an employee do that? It is, after all, the employee who is at risk. One would hope the employee would be happy to comply with safety practices designed to protect his or her well-being.

Paradoxically, it is exactly because the employee faces the risk that the employee feels entitled to be the one to weigh the seriousness of that risk versus the cost in time, inconvenience, or discomfort he or she is willing to tolerate to avoid it. Experience teaches employees that most of the time they can take risks without significant consequences. The risk of falling while standing on an office chair to reach a file on an upper shelf may seem small compared to the time and inconvenience of going to get a step-stool. That is unless you end being the rare person with a spinal-cord injury because of the fall.

The risks of unsafe behavior may seem unlikely or inconsequential, but the rewards for taking chances can be very real. Employees commonly receive verbal or written praise for being fast and efficient with company resources. They may even receive monetary awards and promotions for reducing costs or increasing productivity. It is rare however for supervisors to recognize individual employees for safe behavior even in organizations which tally injury free days. Is it any wonder then that employees will choose to ignore safety policies if those policies slow them down or inconvenience them as they work?

Behavior-based safety initiatives seek to change the risk equation to favor safe behaviors over unsafe behaviors by eliminating obstacles which make safety more time-consuming or costly and by rewarding specific safe behaviors and a positive safety culture in general. The basic components of a program include:

- **A steering committee familiar with the safety program** which identifies a few critical behaviors that can be objectively observed and recorded, and then designs an audit form for those activities --- wearing a safety vest, steel-toed boots, hard-hat, and safety glasses when unloading thousand pound weights on the dock for example.
- **Anonymous safety audits.** The person doing the audit is identified so he can be rewarded for participation later but the person being audited is kept a secret. It is very important that audits never result in negative consequences or co-workers will be unwilling to perform them and the chance to gather valuable information will be lost. In a successful program, audits will be a casual, everyday occurrence. John walks by as employee Y is unloading weights and tells employee Y that he would like to audit him for a few minutes. John records what he observes on an audit form noting everything that was done correctly. He then gives employee Y some immediate feedback, asks a few questions, and goes on his way.
- **Immediate positive feedback from the auditor at the time of the audit.** Both parties benefit from this interaction. The audited employee gets immediate recognition for any safe practices he was employing. "Way to go for wearing your steel-toed boots and hard hat!" The auditor gets the warm feeling of being able to give positive reinforcement to a co-worker, and is also more likely to follow safety procedures in the future because the audit list is fresh in his mind and because he doesn't want to seem like a hypocrite if he doesn't follow procedures.
- **Respectful, non-judgmental curiosity about safety behaviors which did not occur.** The auditor is not there to discipline or correct his co-worker but to gather information for the steering committee. "Tell me about your decision not to wear a safety vest or safety glasses." The auditor then records the impediments listed by the employee. "The safety vest is too tight over my jacket and the dock is cold with the door open. I didn't want to make the driver wait while I found a pair of glasses."
- **Verbal, written, and other rewards for participation as an auditor.** The information gathered in audits is critical in eliminating unsafe behaviors and ultimately will result in savings due to a reduction in injury claims and lost time. Employees need to receive tangible rewards for gathering that information just as if they had saved the organization time and money in other ways.
- **Regular reviews by the steering committee resulting in corrective actions.** The steering committee reviews the information and makes recommendations for corrective action to management. "Replace current uniform jackets with high visibility jackets so employees don't have to choose between being warm and being safe. Put a receptacle for safety glasses by the dock door so they are always at hand."
- **Buy-in from all levels, especially management.** The program will die if management does not follow through on steering committee recommendations, or if management is seen as being outside the safety program altogether. In the most successful programs, managers can be

audited just like any employee, and should conduct audits just like any employee as long as they can discipline themselves to give out positive feedback and to gather information only.

Following up on the committee recommendations is the most critical component however.

Employees need to see that audits result in positive changes or they won't continue to do them.

You can find many books and consultants on the internet to help you design a safety-based program if you are interested. A relatively inexpensive introduction to the topic is the book ***Removing Obstacles to Safety: A Behavior-Based Approach*** by Judy Agnew and Gail Snyder (Performance Management Publications, 2002).

If you already have a safety program in place and have reached a plateau in your safety improvements which does not seem to respond to new equipment, policies, disciplines, or procedures, it may be time to see what obstacles are preventing your employees from following safety procedures. A behavior based safety program can help you identify and remove those obstacles, tipping the scales in favor of safe working practices.