

Behavior-Based Safety: Myth or Magic?

Behavior-based safety is a broad term used to describe everything from basic employee behavior audits and feedback to a comprehensive safety management system designed to change a company's safety culture.

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When it was introduced, behavior-based safety (BBS) was seen as a magic panacea for everything that ailed safety programs. "It was the Swiss Army Knife of safety programs. It could take care of everything," says Ron Bowles, director of operations for Portland, Ore.-based Strategic Safety Associates. "Now people realize that it is just one tool and more are needed."

Decades after the initial launch of BBS programs, **the process has lost favor with many safety managers, who claim the cost – such programs can be expensive – and the long-term results are not what they expected.**

Some experts argue that expectations for BBS were **unrealistic from the start**, while others believe the process has been corrupted at some companies, transformed into an **auditing program that assumes a "blame the employee" attitude about safety failures**. "Behavior-based safety makes the assumption you know what behaviors you should be doing," says Robert Pater, managing director of Strategic Safety Associates. "It assumes you know what to do and need to be reminded to do it."

Not surprisingly, that approach failed at many companies, says Larry Hansen, CSP, ARM, author and principal of L2H Speaking of Safety Inc.

"My intro to behavior-based safety was being asked by my employer at the time to go to an Indiana food distribution company to analyze the safety program," remembers Hansen. "At 9 a.m., I walked in the door and the general manager said, 'Stop right there. I just bought a gun, and the next SOB who mentions behavioral safety...'"

Hansen said the company had spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on a behavior-based safety program and it had failed miserably. "It never had a chance," he says. "There was a poor manager and a sick organization. They bought into it because they thought it said what they wanted to hear about the cause of incidents, what I call PDDT: people doing dumb things. In other words, employees are the problem and a BBS program can 'fix' them. **It's a core misconception that leads to failure.**"

The Myth

Jim Spigener, vice president of BST Inc., a global safety consulting and solutions firm that was one of the pioneers in the concept of BBS, says BBS caught fire because "for years and years and years, there wasn't much new in safety. Then someone seized on the fact that management might want to pay attention to employees. But very few companies were ready to embrace the whole movement."

Even without a total commitment to changing the safety culture with BBS as a part of that process, BBS caught on "because it was getting results and it seemed to make sense," says Spigener.

BBS was meant to be part of a bigger safety system, he adds, mentioning what he calls the "fatal error" of assuming that BBS in some form or another works as the only approach necessary to improve safety and reduce incidents.

“BBS, the way people talk about it now, is really a myth,” says Spigener. “A lot of companies jumped on the bandwagon, grabbed a BBS program off the shelf and now are disappointed with the results. **And unions have a very good case for going after traditional BBS programs [that ‘blame’ the worker]. Traditional BBS programs don’t examine what drives employees to be in a hazardous situation.**”

Hansen offers a perfect example to illustrate Spigener’s point. Hansen says he visited a facility that incurred repetitive losses from injuries employees suffered running up the lunchroom stairwell. Finally, an employee fell and broke his leg, at which point management adopted a BBS program, installing monitors in the hallway leading to the stairwell to remind employees to walk up the steps and to reiterate the company policy, which called for no running. Despite the focus on employee behavior, employees continued running up the stairs until a second major incident occurred, leaving an employee paralyzed. Finally, someone got smart and began to examine systemic causes for employee behavior that ran contrary to company policy and, even, common sense.

“They weren’t asking the most basic question of employees: ‘Why are you running up the stairs?’” says Hansen. “The answer was, ‘There aren’t enough chairs in the lunchroom.’” Employees knew, says Hansen, that if they were late entering the lunchroom, they had to stand to eat their lunches.

“Behavior-based safety done right can be very effective at helping you discover what’s wrong with an organization, find the core organizational causes of risk,” Hansen adds. “Done wrong, it can be used to mask organizational and **management failures.**”

It’s the Culture, Stupid

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D., talks of attending a session at a safety conference where the presenter asked audience members if they had been injured in a workplace incident and then asked, “How many [incidents] were caused by another person? An equipment failure? Your behavior?”

“When the majority raised their hands when he asked if their behavior caused the incident, he said, ‘I rest my case,’” Geller, alumni distinguished professor at Virginia Tech and director of the Center for Applied Behavior Systems in the Department of Psychology, remembers. “But he didn’t go to the next step and ask the next question: ‘What influences behavior?’ It all happens as part of the culture.”

BBS has its virtues, says Donald Eckenfelder, CSP, P.E., the principal consultant with Profit Protection Consultants and a past president of the American Society of Safety Engineers, but it also has its faults, one of which is the lack of focus on the overall safety culture and environment at a facility. To its credit, Eckenfelder says BBS:

- Focuses on the human side of safety;
- Defines safe and unsafe behaviors;
- Encourages safe behavior and discourages unsafe or destructive behaviors;
- Involves employees in safety;
- Requires management to put its money where its mouth is; and
- Engenders commitment and passion, especially in the early phases.

“There are clearly good things about behavior-based safety,” says Eckenfelder. “But there is more negative than positive” in many of the BBS programs companies have adopted, he adds.

For example, many BBS programs, as packaged by the provider or used by the customer, don’t deal with the causes of safety failures; they deal with the symptoms. “Behaviors of employees are a long way from the root cause,” says Eckenfelder.

If corporate management supports and encourages safe behavior by eliminating root causes – such as engineering, process, communication or training failures – then employees are more likely to want to adopt safe behaviors. Employers, managers and supervisors who actively and vocally support safe production and put money and resources behind that support are less likely to get pushback from employees regarding safe behavior.

“Safety isn’t primarily a technical problem or a behavioral problem,” Eckenfelder points out. “It’s a cultural problem. If the culture’s wrong, nothing else works.”

He notes that when we walk into clothing stores or restaurants, we know if the culture is good or bad. “Can’t you feel the culture?” Eckenfelder asks. “If they’ve got the culture ‘right,’ you say to yourself, ‘Wow! I’d really like to come back here.’”

And the quickest way to ensure safety culture failure, experts agree, is to try to “force” safe behavior on employees.

Experts equate such pressure to a parent telling a teenager how to behave ... and say it gets about the same response. As Robert Pater, managing director of Strategic Safety Associates, says, “You can’t mandate people to monitor themselves. You can invite them to do it. Forcing change creates pushback.”

If you really want behavioral change, says Pater, “employees have to see the value of change. They have to believe they can change. They have to know how to change. They have to practice, because behavioral change doesn’t happen from one exposure. And the new actions have to be reinforced through acknowledgment, celebration and external monitoring.”

The key to true, positive behavior change, adds Bowles, “is to create an environment where, rather than have safety as something that is being done to me or for me, it’s something that’s being done with me or by me. Once I begin to own it, I can have incredible success.”

“Real change happens inside out,” Eckenfelder adds. “People get better because they change their attitudes, not because there is pressure placed on them from the outside.”

BBS and Beyond

Everyone we spoke with agrees that one of the original basic concepts of BBS – pointing out to employees how they contribute to a safe work environment by informing them when they are performing safe or unsafe acts – can be an essential part of a system that contributes to a healthy safety culture.

And encouraging all employees to take an active, thinking role in their safety and the safety process is a step in the right direction, says Geller, another of the pioneers of BBS.

Geller now says he believes in “people-based” safety. He promotes what he calls ACTS – actions and coaching, which are behavior-based, and thinking and seeing, which are people-based.

“The key challenge to safety is to inspire people to be self-accountable. We need to transition from programs that promote other-directed accountability to ones that promote self-directed accountability,” says Geller.

In order for any system or program to be successful, he adds, the corporate culture must be taken into consideration. “What works for Coca-Cola is not going to work for a company with a different culture,” Geller points out. “The cookie-cutter approach never works.”

And “fixing” employees without fixing a broken culture never works either, says Pater. “BBS was sometimes used as an excuse to not make changes to the corporate culture,” he notes. “In other words, ‘I’m OK, you’re broken.’ We need to move beyond that.”

Sidebar

“The reason I lack a thorough understanding of the movement is because I abandoned the process very early in my career following a very bad experience.

One of the companies I worked for used a safety observation program. This program essentially required supervisors to record observations and turn them in for review. The program almost destroyed the positive culture that had been fostered by our forward-thinking operations manager.

The regional safety folks for this company established quotas for these observation cards. The supervisors would sit around a table fabricating observations to meet their quotas on the Thursday before they were due. When they did record field observations, the employees resented it because the program seemed to assign blame to the workforce (whether that was the intent or not).

In many cases, the supervisors knew employees were engaged in “unsafe” behaviors because they were short on resources, equipment or some other necessary tool, system or process necessary to perform their work safely. The program almost caused a riot.

When I took over the program from my predecessor, I threw a barbecue and we burned all of the materials. We invited all the employees to attend. Culture restored, friendships renewed!

My gut reaction, based on early experience, is that the behavioral movement was an effort to sell a cure and sell measurement of the safety process. I think behavioral safety measures reactions and not processes. I also think it can create more problems than it solves. I think people find the “bandwagon” **easy to sell to management (most believe employees are the problem anyway) and it’s easier than turning a mirror on the organization.**” – Dan Zahlis (Dan Zahlis is president and founder of Active Agenda Inc., a Web-enabled, community-developed, risk management solutions project, and a 15-year practitioner of risk and safety management.)