

A Common Mistake in Behavior-Based Coaching

Behavior-based coaching has been addressed on several occasions in *Industrial Safety and Hygiene News (ISHN)* by various authors, including me. When implemented correctly, behavior-based coaching enhances a shared responsibility and ownership for safety achievement. It puts workers in control of safety. Most importantly, the process leads to reductions in personal injury. And sometimes, a lower recordable injury rate can be realized quickly (see, for example, the article by Dr. McSween in last February's issues of *ISHN*).

The key process underlying the success of behavior-based coaching is interpersonal observation and feedback. After appropriate education and training, workers develop specific procedures for carrying out the following steps: 1) a list of critical safe and at-risk behaviors is derived for particular work areas or for an entire work site, 2) the critical behaviors are defined precisely and operationally so all participants can observe them objectively and reliably, 3) a critical behavior checklist (CBC) is developed on which to record occurrences of safe and at-risk behaviors, 4) observers use the CBC to observe and evaluate the work practices of individuals or groups, 5) observers share the results of their behavioral audits with the people they observe in one-to-one coaching sessions and at group meetings, 6) participants periodically discuss successes and failures with their observation and feedback procedures and thereby continually improve the process, and 7) participants develop intervention techniques to decrease resistance and increase long-term involvement in the process.

This is only a brief overview of behavior-based coaching. I have obviously left out numerous details. However the basic framework given here is sufficient for appreciating the primary theme of this article, even for readers who have not participated in a behavior-based

observation and feedback process. That is, I want to explain a common mistake I've observed in behavior-based coaching and illustrate how to overcome it.

The principles behind this mistake and solution are basic to all interpersonal interaction, and therefore the lesson here is relevant to readers who have not tried behavior-based coaching. And, frankly, if you have not tried behavior-based coaching to reduce workplace injuries you're making a bigger mistake. The objective scientific data are clear. When implemented correctly, behavior-based coaching works. Of course the key phrase is "when implemented correctly." This brings me to the theme of this article.

A Case Study

A personal experience illustrates a common problem in the implementation of behavior-based coaching. I recently met with a group of line workers who had been implementing a behavior-based coaching process for about a year. They had reached an all-time low in recordable injuries, so management considered this program successful. In fact, part of my visit to this large facility was devoted to discussing a broader implementation plan.

These workers were not satisfied with their process. Many one-on-one coaching sessions were constructive, but many were not. Some workers were quite negative with regard to the one-to-one observation and feedback interactions. Thus, while injuries were on the decline, several safety coaches were seemingly discouraged and "burning out" on the whole process. They asked me, "How can we maintain enthusiasm for behavior-based safety and keep our successful process going?" I proceeded to outline a number of motivational plans. I discussed individual commitment, group feedback, and behavior-based incentive strategies, and related these intervention approaches to their situation. During our discussion, however, I realized I was on the wrong track. There was a more basic reason for the increasing disinterest in behavioral

observation and feedback. Too often the safety coaching sessions were more negative than positive.

One individual explained that he recently approached a coworker who was working without the proper personal protective equipment (PPE) and asked if he could conduct a behavioral observation. After receiving reluctant approval, he proceeded to fill out his CBC. Since his checklist included many more checkmarks in the “at-risk” than “safe” columns, the feedback session with this employee was necessarily more negative than positive.

I suggested that the way to assure a positive feedback session would have been to ask the worker “if you could return in about ten minutes to conduct a behavioral observation.” This would have given the employee ample time to find the appropriate PPE and put it on for the observation. Then the CBC would have more “safe” than “at-risk” checks, and the coaching session could be more positive than negative. This practice could increase the acceptability of the entire behavior-based coaching process.

The group’s immediate reaction to my suggestion seemed to be either confusion or outright disagreement. One employee remarked, “Why if we did our observations that way, we’d never get true data.” Herein lies a basic misconception about the use of a CBC and a common mistake in implementing behavior-based coaching. Workers get so involved in completing their observation checklists, tallying their results, and posting group percentages on feedback charts that they lose site of the primary purpose of the process.

The Purpose of Behavior-Based Coaching

When I asked the employees their personal reasons for participating in the coaching process, they readily agreed with my suggestion for making safety coaching more positive. They were not coaching to obtain “true” measures of safe versus at-risk behavior. I explained, in

fact, their numbers would only be acceptable as “true” by the scientific community if two observers independently observed the same work process and scored their checklists exactly the same for 85% or more of the categories.

Participants in a behavior-based coaching process realize its primary purpose is to support safe behavior, reduce at-risk behavior, and thereby prevent injuries. Yet it’s easy to get caught up in the numbers. I’ve seen observers continue to complete their CBC while the person they were observing continued to perform at-risk behavior. That is, they seemed more interested in checking the “at-risk” column of their CBC than intervening to stop the at-risk behavior. Of course, it is easier to observe and check columns on a CBC than it is to intervene to change behavior, especially if the one-on-one feedback component of behavior-based coaching is perceived as negative.

The most important information to track in behavior-based coaching is amount of participation. Thus, the number of CBC cards turned in is more diagnostic than the number of “safe” versus “at-risk” columns checked per card. To be sure, comparing the percentages of safe behaviors across CBC categories helps pinpoint problem areas for intervention attention. But, degree of participation in the process is far more predictive of outcome success (or injury reduction) than are individual percentages of safe behavior.

In Conclusion

This article reviewed the components of behavior-based safety coaching and discussed a particular pitfall to avoid when implementing the process. The objective measurement of safe versus at-risk behaviors up-stream from “near misses” and injuries is clearly a primary strength of behavior-based safety in general, and behavior-based coaching in particular. However, the interpersonal observation and feedback process is the most important advantage of behavior-

based coaching. This intervention process enables workers to truly actively care for the safety of others.

The actively caring coach realizes that recording information on a CBC is less important than engaging in positive and constructive interaction with another worker. The primary purpose of safety coaching is to support safe behavior and correct at-risk behavior. So intervening immediately to stop at-risk behavior is more important than completing a CBC. And, if a coaching session could be more positive and accepting without a CBC, then put the CBC aside. It's essential that safety coaching is positive and nonthreatening. This builds confidence, group cohesion, and interpersonal trust. The beneficial outcome will be increased participation in the safety coaching process, which is key to making a difference with behavior-based safety.

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