

Using Behavioral Safety to Improve Safety Culture

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Introduction

In implementing behavior-based safety (BBS) processes with leading organizations around the world, we continually stress that one of the main benefits of BBS is improved organizational safety culture and communication throughout the organization. Improving safety communication through BBS fosters a more positive and healthy organizational safety culture and reduces the chances that employees will get hurt on the job.

With this in mind, we use a safety culture survey to assess employees' beliefs and attitudes regarding the safety culture. This measures management support for safety, peer support for safety, personal responsibility for safety, and overall safety management systems. An integral part of safety culture is the frequency and quality of safety communication. One of the communication issues we address on the survey involves employees' opinions about cautioning coworkers "when observing them perform at-risk behaviors." Three items on the survey address this particular issue:

- *Employees should* caution coworkers when observing them perform at-risk behaviors.
- *I am willing to* caution coworkers when observing them perform at-risk behaviors.
- *I do* caution coworkers when observing them perform at-risk behaviors.

The first question assesses respondents' "values." The second question addresses employees' "intentions." The third question involves respondents' "behavior." From more than 70,000 surveys given over the last 10 years, approximately **90%** of employees agree that you "should" give employees feedback when they are performing an at-risk behavior. Nearly **85%** of respondents report that they are "willing" to give correcting feedback when a coworker is performing an at-risk behavior. Unfortunately, only about **60%** of respondents say they actually "do" provide correcting feedback when a coworker is performing an at-risk behavior.

Clearly, there is a big difference between employees "values/intentions" and their actual "behavior" in terms of providing correcting feedback to others when they are performing at-risk behaviors. This is problematic when we consider that the vast majority of injuries are due, in part, to at-risk behaviors. It is alarming that people are reluctant to warn others when these at-risk behaviors are occurring.

During training classes we ask employees why there is such a gap between our values (i.e., you “should” caution others) and behaviors (i.e., you “do” caution others) regarding correcting feedback. Common responses include:

- If I give somebody feedback about a safety issue, they’re going to get angry. I don’t want to cause problems or get yelled at.
- It’s not my job to give peers feedback. I’m not a supervisor.
- I’ve never given peer feedback before.
- I don’t know enough about that job to give feedback.
- I don’t want to give feedback to someone who has more experience than I do.
- I’m not sure I can give appropriate feedback.
- If I give somebody safety feedback, I’ll be accused of having a hidden agenda.

Behavior-based safety helps break down these barriers by promoting more frequent, respectful, and open communication between employees. Employees are encouraged to use a behavioral checklist (designed by an employee-led steering team within the organization) to observe coworkers and then provide both rewarding (e.g., “nice job”) and correcting (e.g., “be careful”) feedback. The idea is to institutionalize peer-to-peer safety feedback as a normal, established way of doing business (with or without a checklist).

Behavior Observation and Feedback: A Key to Achieving a Total Safety Culture

Improving the frequency and openness of safety communication at all organizational levels is required to achieve a Total Safety Culture. This is encouraged through an observation and feedback process. In such a process, employees define key safety-related behaviors and then develop a Critical Behavioral Checklist (CBC) containing those behaviors (see Figure 1).

Using the checklist, employees observe each other on the job and then provide positive and respectful one-on-one coaching feedback for both safe and at-risk behaviors observed. This peer-to-peer conversation is instrumental in changing at-risk work practices as well as providing formal opportunities for employees to compliment one another for completing tasks safely. Also, the feedback allows the observer and observee to analyze tasks together to identify and remove any barriers to safe work performance such as uncomfortable or inconvenient PPE or ergonomically incorrect equipment layout.

Next, observation data from individual checklists are regularly collected, compiled, and shared with the employees as group feedback. This information is analyzed to identify behavioral categories needing special attention. Work teams then develop intervention strategies to improve areas of weakness using a continuous improvement process known as **DO IT**.

Simply, **DO IT** involves four sequential steps: a) **D**efine critical behaviors to improve, b) **O**bserve target behaviors during a baseline phase to set specific goals for achievement, c) **I**ntervene to change the target behaviors in the desired direction, and d) **T**est the impact of the intervention by continuing to observe the target behaviors. If the desired results are not achieved, other interventions are implemented. When improvement goals are met, other target behaviors can then be selected.

Thus, the use of a behavioral checklist with BBS helps employees recognize both safe and at-risk behaviors on the job and encourages employees to effectively share that information. This not only reduces the chance for injury, it increases the amount of peer-to-peer recognition on the job. This improves both safety performance as well as safety culture throughout the organization.

BBS Training

It is important to teach employees how to accurately and effectively use a behavior observation card. This includes learning to look for both safe and at-risk behaviors. It also involves how to approach someone regarding an observation. Effective observation and feedback processes are anonymous and confidential. Observers should NOT write down the name of the employee being observed. Further, it is important that employees are clearly visible when doing observations. In other words, employees should not be “sneaking around corners” trying to do an observation.

Beyond teaching employees how to conduct a behavioral observation, it is important to teach employees how to give and receive feedback effectively. During BBS training, employees learn techniques for providing positive, effective feedback that other employees will appreciate rather than resent. In addition, employees learn how to better receive feedback instead of being defensive. The communication piece of BBS training is very important in shaping an observation and feedback process that builds a more open and trusting safety culture.

Behavioral Safety Checklists Improve Safety Communication and Culture

Through repeated administrations of the safety culture survey, organizations often find that the gap between “employees should caution coworkers” and “I do caution coworkers” is greatly diminished following BBS implementation. In other words, employees are much more likely to caution one another about risky behaviors when they are involved in a BBS process. Also, companies demonstrate that peer-to-peer safety feedback is increasing by charting the number of behavior observation checklists completed over time. When done correctly, an increase in the number of observation cards means that there is an increase in the number of safety conversations between employees. This leads to a more open and healthy organizational safety culture.

Beyond increasing correcting feedback, it is also important to consider the power of rewarding safety feedback to increase safe work practices. Praising people for safe work practices: a) increases the probability that these work practices will be performed safely in the future, and b) builds a more open and positive safety culture.

With this in mind, we sometimes ask training participants the following questions:

1. If you do something risky, what is the likelihood that a coworker will warn you about it?
2. If you do a given task completely safe, what is the likelihood that a coworker will praise or thank you?

Responses to the first question vary greatly but may average around 50-60%. However, responses to the second questions vary from laughter to (maybe) 5%. Simply put, positive safety feedback

between employees rarely occurs in most organizations. Behavioral safety encourages employees to notice (via a behavioral safety checklist) and then praise others for working safely.

Both correcting and rewarding feedback influences safety behaviors and *transforming at-risk behaviors to safe work habits is integral to injury avoidance on the job*. Through the course of a workday, employees face hundreds of instances where they can choose to work safely or at-risk. Unfortunately, employees are often reinforced for performing tasks in an at-risk manner because doing so is typically faster, easier, more comfortable, and more convenient than following the safe procedures. Examples of at-risk choices include: not wearing protective gear, failing to follow standard energy-controlled lock-out procedures, lifting a heavy object without a hoist, standing on a machine instead of a ladder, etc. In addition to the natural consequences like ease and comfort, external factors often further reinforce at-risk behavior. For instance, workers may feel management pressure to take safety short-cuts for production. Other factors like fatigue from overtime, problems with the job layout or equipment, and poor training may also contribute to risky behaviors being performed. The point is, we are naturally inclined to take risks. Further, we need correcting feedback from others to warn us about the potential dangers of being risky and rewarding feedback from others to recognize safe behaviors (which may increase the probability we will continue to be safe in the future). *Increasing the quality and frequency of both correcting and rewarding feedback helps employees move from performing at-risk behaviors to conducting safe work practices even when the natural consequences support being risky.*

Conclusion

Behavior-based safety training and implementation helps improve organizational safety culture. By increasing the quality and frequency of safety feedback in the organization, barriers between employees both within and across organizational levels are reduced. Improving safety communication (both correcting and rewarding feedback) through BBS leads to a more open, positive, and trusting safety culture as well as improved safety performance.

Figure 1. An example of a Behavior Observation Checklist

| Generic Observation Checklist | | | |
|--------------------------------------|------|---------|----------|
| Observer: | | Date: | |
| Other: | | Other: | |
| Behaviors | Safe | At-Risk | Comments |
| 1) PPE | | | |
| a. Head | | | |
| b. Eyes/Face | | | |
| c. Hearing | | | |
| d. Hand | | | |
| e. Foot | | | |
| f. Protective Clothing | | | |
| g. | | | |
| 2) Tool/Equipment | | | |
| a. Correct Tool for the Task | | | |
| b. Proper Use of Tool | | | |
| c. Tool in Good Condition | | | |
| d. | | | |
| 3) Body Position / Protection | | | |
| a. Lifting / Bending | | | |
| b. Reaching / Twisting | | | |
| c. Pushing / Pulling | | | |
| d. Neutral, Stable Posture | | | |
| e. Line of Fire / Pinch Points | | | |
| f. | | | |
| 4) Housekeeping | | | |
| a. Slip Trip Hazards | | | |
| b. Orderly Storage | | | |
| c. Clear aisles, Exits | | | |
| d. | | | |
| 5) Pace of Work | | | |
| | | | |
| 6) Communications | | | |
| | | | |
| 7) Visual Focus | | | |
| | | | |