

Guidelines for Managing Participation in Behavior-Based Coaching

Last month I reviewed five guidelines for increasing the participation of line workers in a safety process. These principles were presented within the context of behavior-based safety (BBS), but each is relevant beyond BBS. In fact, the guidelines I presented last month can be applied to increase employee involvement in any organizational effort.

This month I explain five guidelines that are more specific to BBS coaching. However, they are relevant to any organization that can benefit from a systematic approach to improve on-the-job competence, whether the performance target is safety, customer service, product quality, or output quantity. In other words, behavior requires feedback to improve, and BBS coaching enables a mechanism for providing such feedback on an ongoing basis. Let's consider five guidelines for optimizing the input of an interpersonal coaching process for benefiting competence.

1. Ensure the Coach is Nondirective.

At first, peer-to-peer observation and feedback can feel awkward for both the observer and the observee. In fact, interpersonal coaching can come across as confrontational, with one person (the observer) assigned to audit another person's work practices and then offer corrective advice for eliminating any undesirable behavior observed. Such a perception of behavioral coaching hinders interpersonal trust and stifles involvement, ownership, and empowerment.

From the start it's critical to emphasize that the observer (unlike a typical athletic coach) is not responsible for corrective action. The observer merely completes a critical behavior checklist (CBC) and afterwards shows the observee the results. The CBC was developed through interactive group discussion among line workers representative of the relevant workforce.

The two workers might discuss environmental or system factors that discourage safe behavior and encourage at-risk behavior. And, they might consider ways to remove barriers to safe behavior. The coach might offer positive words of approval to recognize certain safe behavior, but gives no disapproval statements nor directives related to any observed at-risk behavior.

With regard to at-risk behavior, the coach is nondirective. In other words, the observer provides specific behavior-based feedback for the observee to consider. There is no peer pressure to change. The only accountability is *self*-accountability. Any adjustment in behavior is self-directed, provoked by the results of a non-intrusive and *anticipated* application of a CBC.

2. Progress from Announced to Unannounced Observations.

Let's consider the word "anticipated" in the prior sentence. Taken literally, it means the recipient of an observation and feedback session knows it's coming and can prepare for a good showing. Consequently, the observations are not random and the results are not really representative of a worker's daily routine. The CBC data are biased toward the positive. The "percent safe score" is higher than reality warrants.

The next guideline builds on this point about unrealistic (or invalid) behavioral data. Here we need to consider a justification for announcing the behavioral observations. If making employees aware of the observations leads to overly positive results, why announce them? One way to answer this question is to consider the alternative.

Imagine workers sneaking around and completing CBC's unbeknownst to those being observed. This approach would be viewed by many as a "gotcha program," undermining interpersonal trust, involvement, and ownership. The lower "percent safe" scores might be more accurate, but at the expense of the attitudes and person states needed to achieve the interpersonal cooperation and learning needed to achieve an injury-free workplace.

Even when they know they are being observed, workers still perform certain at-risk behaviors. These are the work practices that benefit most from behavioral feedback. The observation process holds people accountable to perform their jobs as safely as they know how. When they learn ways to be more safe under these circumstances, workers truly add new behavioral patterns to their knowledge base. This is maximum behavior-based learning.

While this guideline reflects the need to start BBS coaching with announced observations, a transition to unannounced observations is beneficial. Specifically, the organizations most successful at BBS coaching progress from announced to unannounced behavioral observations. This shift should only occur when workers realize the process is truly for their own benefit. The guidelines presented here help make this happen.

Some clients of Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) have developed creative ways to facilitate the transition from announced to unannounced observations. For example, one organization distributed hard-hat stickers workers could display to indicate their willingness to be observed. Thus, the workers at this site placed a special sticker on their hard hat whenever they were willing to be the recipient of a BBS coaching session. Eventually, every employee at this facility had this special sticker pasted on their hard hats throughout the entire day.

At another facility, employees put their name in a raffle jar whenever they were willing to be observed anytime on a particular day. The observers selected their coaching assignments each day by randomly drawing a name from this pool. Eventually the daily drawing included every worker. Everyone gave permission to be observed once they were convinced BBS coaching was not the traditional, top-down enforcement approach to occupational safety, but was an interdependent learning process that enabled workers to actively care for the safety and health of their team members.

3. Focus on the Interaction, Not Just the Numbers.

Some BBS consultants emphasize the objective data obtained from a comprehensive observation and feedback process. They sell computer software to organize and summarize the results from CBC's and to pinpoint targets for intervention. Computer programs can compare various workgroups on various dimensions of a BBS coaching process and track the results of consecutive days, weeks, or months of behavioral observations. Thus, work teams can benchmark

objectively with others, and can assess successive attempts to improve quantity and quality of BBS coaching participation, as well as the percentage of safe behavior.

The data analysis feature of BBS coaching is critical to its remarkable success. Behavioral data enable objective pinpointing of targets for improvement, as well as continuous evaluation of corrective action procedures. Such data provide objective evidence of accomplishment, and thereby justify recognition and celebration. Thus, the data available from BBS auditing procedures are invaluable, but it's important to look beyond the numbers.

It's easy to become over-analytical with the results of BBS observations. The benefits of BBS coaching extend far beyond the evaluation of critical CBC's. In fact, it's likely most records of behavioral observations are biased and unreliable. They are typically obtained under unnatural conditions, as when the observations are announced beforehand. And there is a tendency to overlook at-risk behavior, especially when an interpersonal feedback session is expected to follow an observation session.

Thus, the data from BBS observation and feedback sessions provide useful comparative information, across sessions within the same work group and between different work teams. But don't take the absolute values of these numbers too seriously. And above all, consider that the process of interpersonal observation and feedback is more powerful than the numbers with regard to achieving an injury-free workplace.

The communication components of BBS coaching demonstrate the value of peer support, develop interpersonal trust, and help to cultivate the kind of learning-oriented organization that brings out the best in people. The process teaches workers they can be “unconsciously incompetent” and that they need feedback from others to improve. This leads to an interdependency perspective – a realization that the success of an organization is dependent upon systems of people contributing diverse talents and relying on each other synergistically to make the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

4. Continuously Evaluate and Refine the Process

No process targeting human behavior is carved in stone. Behavior is dynamic, continually adjusting to changing demands, expectations, and ergonomics. Consequently, CBC’s need to be periodically revised, along with adjustments in the procedures used to conduct behavioral observations and deliver feedback.

With experience, BBS coaches become more adept at noticing the subtle features of safe vs. at-risk work practices, beyond the obvious use of personal protective equipment. This continual increase in coaching expertise needs to be reflected in revised CBC’s. In addition, techniques to support BBS principles and procedures (such as incentives, accountability techniques, and group meetings) need to be responsive to changes in the workplace, including behaviors, attitudes, management systems, and the environmental context.

Bottom line: Continually assess the behavioral and attitudinal impact of your BBS coaching procedures, and make refinements accordingly. The data

analysis referred to in the prior guideline provides objective information regarding behavior change. An evaluation of people's opinions and attitudes about a BBS coaching process requires interpersonal conversations with both participants and nonparticipants. These should occur in both group and individual one-to-one sessions.

Perception surveys can enable a broad site-wide assessment of employees' feelings about a BBS process. However, this approach can be quite cumbersome and time-consuming to develop, implement, and evaluate, and thus may not be practical. Moreover, unless open-ended questions are included, a perception survey provides no specific direction for procedural refinement. And, surveys often come across as top-down or one-way communication with limited facilitation of employee ownership.

Interviews and group discussions take longer than objective surveys, especially if a representative sample is desired, but usually the added benefits far outweigh the costs. While gaining specific recommendations for improvement, opportunities are provided for employee involvement, choice, and ownership. The value of these dynamic and interdependent qualities of a BBS coaching process were discussed in my *ISHN* contribution last month.

5. Make the Process Part of a Larger Effort

Over the years, BBS has attracted many critics. Some of the negative reactions are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the principles and methods of BBS. More specifically, some authors have portrayed BBS as any attempt to influence behavior, regardless of the intervention approach or the

intervention target. For example, training and enforcement programs to improve attitudes, intentions, or thinking have been referred to as BBS. In contrast, other safety pros typify BBS as only one kind of intervention – behavioral observation and feedback.

While this presentation does focus on behavior-based coaching as the intervention approach, BBS principles can be applied to many other domains of occupational safety, including ergonomics, training, recognition and celebration, hazard identification, and corrective action, to name a few. In each of these cases, BBS reflects a particular approach toward handling the human dynamics of the effort. Therefore, observation and feedback are not BBS, but are components of an interpersonal coaching process for improving safety-related behavior that applies certain research-supported tools derived from BBS.

It's important to view behavior-based observation and feedback as one of many systematic ways to prevent personal injury in the workplace. Yes – this intervention approach was developed by behavioral scientists and it incorporates basic principles and procedures from BBS. However, it is not BBS. Rather, BBS represents an overall approach toward dealing with the behavioral dynamics of injury prevention. Just like the guidelines presented here are relevant to the development, application, and evaluation of more safety programs than an observation and feedback process, the philosophy and technology of BBS are applicable to more occupational safety efforts than an observation and feedback process.

In Conclusion

I have reviewed five guidelines or rules for establishing an effective interpersonal behavior-based coaching process for injury prevention. These guidelines, and those provided last month, were not derived overnight, nor were they gleaned from textbooks or research articles. Rather, they were developed from a decade of studying more than 100 actual industrial applications. Hence, these guidelines can be considered “lessons learned” from real-world experience helping organizations initiate and sustain an effective behavioral observation and feedback process.

The guidelines presented here and in my *ISHN* article last month are neither exhaustive nor immutable. They just reflect the state-of-the-art as I see it today. As the result of continuous learning, I expect significant adjustments to this “top ten” list. Indeed, this is the essence of the fourth guideline given here – continuously evaluate your efforts to achieve an injury-free workplace, and use the feedback from your observations to adjust your next attempt to prevent personal injury.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor and Director
Center for Applied Behavior Systems
Virginia Tech

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance teach organizations how to use the principles and methods of behavior-based safety to achieve and maintain an injury-free workplace. For more information about related books, training programs, video and audiotapes, and customized consulting and training options, please visit safety@safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.