

Keys to Increasing Participation in an Occupational Safety Process

I recently heard one of my partners at SPS (Safety Performance Solutions), Dr. Sherry Perdue, deliver a thoughtful and practical presentation on behavior-based safety (BBS) coaching. Her well-attended session, entitled “Getting the most from a behavioral observation and feedback process,” featured 10 guidelines for implementing BBS coaching throughout an organization.

These guidelines were gleaned from a decade of SPS experience helping organizations apply the principles and technology of BBS to develop and sustain an effective observation and feedback process. The guidelines were developed and refined from studying the trials and tribulations of over 100 satisfied SPS clients. I’m convinced they reflect the state-of-the-art in BBS coaching, and thus I’d like to review these guidelines for you – five here and five more next month.

I’ve discussed BBS principles and coaching procedures in prior *ISHN* contributions (for example, December, 1993; March, 1997; September, 1998; January, 1999; and April and May, 2003), but I’ve never presented all of these guidelines together. It should be useful to have all of these in one place, especially since most are relevant for any organizational culture and are applicable for more than safety coaching.

1. Teach Procedures with Principles.

In an earlier *ISHN* column (November, 1996), I distinguished between education and training. Education explains “why” and training shows “how.” Motivation to learn what to do – the procedures – can come from understanding the underlying rationale – the principles. Before people are trained on how to

conduct behavioral observation and feedback, they should be educated on the philosophical foundations of BBS. Then the participants can appreciate the procedures that make the principles practical.

And, when participants learn and accept the principles behind a safety initiative, they can help to define and refine tools and techniques applicable for their work groups. Such participant involvement in designing process steps facilitates empowerment and ownership – the next guideline.

2. Empower Employees to Own the Process.

Genuine empowerment is not given. It is enabled and then released from people when they feel ownership. But, ownership does not come easy, and it doesn't happen overnight. It's not the same as compliance.

We often comply with rules, regulations, and operating procedures without ownership. In this case, we perform because someone is holding us accountable. Such behavior is *other*-directed. Ownership, on the other hand, facilitates internal control, self-accountability, and *self*-directed behavior.

People who get involved in designing, implementing, evaluating, and refining a process acquire a special degree of ownership. Their contributing behaviors are self-directed. These behaviors occur consistently because participants hold themselves responsible, not because someone else is holding them accountable.

How can this level of ownership be reached? The remaining guidelines are key to making this happen. For example, the next implementation principle specifies that participants need to exercise some personal choice throughout a

BBS coaching process – from designing and implementing initial procedures to evaluating and refining the protocol for continuous improvement. Ownership implies personal choice. And people get more involved in procedures influenced by their input.

3. Provide Opportunities for Choice.

Choice, involvement, and ownership go hand-in-hand. Each supports the other two. More of one influences more of the others.

Moreover, choice is motivating. Research has shown that even insignificant choice benefits commitment and human performance. For example, people have shown improved performance when they select aspects of a task that are actually irrelevant to effective completion of the task.

So how much choice is optimal? Is it possible to allow too much choice in a BBS process? Our systematic evaluation of numerous successful BBS programs indicated that too much choice can actually be detrimental. We found that BBS programs labeled “completely voluntary” were generally not as successful as BBS programs introduced with the explicit expectation that everyone will get involved to some degree.

Also, those programs that incorporated an accountability system to track involvement obtained the most participation and success. However, I hasten to add that all of the most successful BBS coaching programs included some element of choice throughout process development, implementation, and continuous improvement.

Maintaining an effective balance between external accountability and personal choice is analogous to this general management principle: Provide structure and direction, but accompany your advice with opportunities to select among alternative action plans. In other words, management should provide structure, instruction, and support for occupational safety, while providing opportunities for employees to develop procedural options and to choose among these. This leads to the next guideline for implementing a behavior-based observation and feedback process.

4. Facilitate Supportive Involvement from Management.

Many consulting firms have marketed BBS as employee-driven and management-independent. As a result, some organizations have implemented BBS tools and methods without active support from management. After arranging for BBS training, the supervisory staff steps back and lets an employee steering committee direct the implementation of a behavioral observation and feedback process. While this enables substantial perception of choice among line workers, employee involvement is often not optimal.

Whether considering BBS coaching or another occupational safety program, a “hands off” policy does not work. Let’s face reality. People give priority to those aspects of their jobs that get attention from supervisors and managers. In other words, people do what they believe they need to do in order to please those who control their monetary compensation for successful job performance.

Yes, self-directed, responsible behavior is best, but often behavior must start as other-directed. Before people can appreciate the natural supportive consequences of BBS coaching, they usually need to be held accountable for carrying out the observation and feedback procedures. Plus, supervisors can do a number of other things to encourage and support BBS coaching, including:

- Allocate time to discuss process activities and results at group meetings.
- Contribute to group discussions of BBS coaching procedures and results.
- Help schedule and coordinate opportunities for BBS coaching activities, such as observation and feedback sessions.
- Request systematic observation and feedback for certain tasks.
- Use the observation data to identify environmental hazards and barriers to safe behavior.
- Help remove hazards and barriers identified in the BBS observation and feedback process.
- Request periodic briefings on data from the BBS coaching process, such as amount of participation, percent safe behavior, number of coaching sessions performed, percentage of safety suggestions accomplished, and results of special BBS intervention efforts.
- Recognize individuals and teams for notable BBS participation.
- Organize and support group celebrations of special safety achievements.

5. Ensure the Process is Non-Punitive.

The last two bullets refer to the use of recognition and group celebrations to support BBS coaching activities and accomplishments. This guideline specifies the avoidance of negative or punitive consequences. I've discussed the disadvantages of traditional enforcement procedures in prior *ISHN* contributions (see, for example, my *ISHN* article for November, 1997). Here I want to emphasize that connecting negative consequences to any aspect of an employee-driven (and management-supported) BBS activity can kill the entire process. Punishment stifles feelings of trust, empowerment, ownership, and commitment.

The data from a BBS observation and feedback process reveal at-risk behaviors and environmental hazards that need attention. It can also demonstrate less-than-optimal participation in a critical safety-related procedure. Such negative results, or specification of improvement needs, can provoke an enforcement mindset and suggest a need for punitive consequences. Please retreat from this traditional approach to safety management.

I am not recommending elimination of all punishment or "discipline" applications, even though most of these are not corrective and can do more harm than good. If you want to use negative consequences to motivate compliance, do so at your own risk. But be sure to administer your enforcement policy independently of all BBS coaching activities.

The workforce must believe the data from their BBS process cannot be held against them. Finding low participation or at-risk behavior is not cause for

punishment; rather it pinpoints opportunities for improvement. Open and frank conversation about areas of concern is much more likely than punishment to increase mindful commitment to change and to activate peer support for specific improvement targets.

In Conclusion

I have reviewed five essential guidelines for implementing an effective, long-term BBS coaching process. They were derived from more than a decade of experience helping more than 100 organizations implement a behavioral observation and feedback process. For many readers these principles may seem to reflect common sense. Consider, however, that numerous BBS programs and other safety-related efforts have not adhered to these guidelines, resulting in less-than-optimal participation.

Through experience and feedback, common sense is informed and evolves into continuous improvement. For those who don't view these guidelines as common sense, I am hopeful this presentation will inform your common sense and influence your behavior. I also hope you see these principles of program implementation relevant for more than BBS coaching. Indeed, these guidelines can be applied to the development, administration, and refinement of any organizational process that can involve the entire workforce and is most effective when it does.

Next month I'll review five additional guidelines for increasing employee participation in an occupational safety program.

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