

Seven Common Pitfalls to Avoid When Implementing Behavior-Based Safety

For more than 20 years I have been teaching principles and procedures of behavior-based safety to employees of corporations and government agencies. Sometimes this education and training has led to the implementation of a successful behavior-change process, resulting in substantial reductions in personal injuries. Although effective at benefiting the bottomline (or preventing losses from on-the-job injury), some behavior-based safety programs have been short-lived. And then there have been times when my behavior-based teaching did nothing more than educate. The training process did not evolve into a program that could make large-scale differences.

My desire to do more than educate in the domain of behavior-based safety led to the establishment of an organization (Safety Performance Solutions) whose mission is to help organizations develop a Total Safety Culture--a culture in which everyone actively cares for the safety and health of others. Such a work culture not only minimizes losses from unintentional injury, but also develops a win/win interdependency among people that facilitates synergy in all organizational functions and systems. Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) has been successful in fulfilling its mission with several customers, but there have been times when good intentions have fallen short. In other words, the right principles and procedures did not result in an optimal long-term safety process.

Over the years, my colleagues at SPS and I have learned (often the hard way) what it takes to translate the principles of behavior-based safety into effective action plans and a long-term safety improvement process. This article reviews some of our most important lessons in terms of specific barriers that can limit the potential of behavior-based safety. These pitfalls are

not only relevant to the application of behavior-based safety, but relate to the implementation of almost any program in an organizational setting.

1. Failure to Teach the Principles to All Potential Participants

How many times have you heard the expression “flavor of the month” leveled at a new organizational program or process? I’ve heard this phrase used frequently with reference to safety programs, and in many cases the label is deserved. Consider how safety programs are typically introduced to potential participants. A corporate official (often a safety director) learns about a new safety program at a conference or in a promotional flyer and orders the appropriate materials, including workbooks, videotapes, and a facilitator’s guide. Sometimes an outside consultant or trainer is hired to teach the new step-by-step procedures to certain personnel. Then these employees demonstrate the new procedures to others while on the job, and thus a new safety program is implemented plantwide. But to many this is just another set of temporary procedures which attempt to reduce outcome numbers (recordable injuries) and make management look good. It is commonly believed that the new program won’t really work to reduce injuries, and therefore it won’t be long before it will be replaced with another “flavor of the month.”

The “flavor-of-the month” attitude occurs when people are not taught the principles or rationale behind a program. They are just trained on how to implement the new process. They are not educated about the research-supported theory and corporate mission statement from which the program emanated. I’ve heard, for example, that some behavior-based safety consultants advocate teaching observation and feedback procedures to a select percentage of the corporate population, with expectation that the procedures will eventually spread throughout the

culture. In a Total Safety Culture everyone participates in behavior-based safety, and therefore everyone understands the principles behind the procedures.

When people learn the theory underlying a method, they develop their own belief system to rationalize compliance with program procedures. They also realize there is more than one way to fulfill a particular mission, and they have the ammunition (principles and guidelines) needed to alter procedures as demands for refinement arise. And, when employees contribute to program improvement the next barrier is overcome.

2. Lack of Perceived Ownership

I've worked with many companies that adopted another organization's safety program exactly as implemented by that organization. They even used the same name for the program. The "DuPont STOP" program is a good example. Many corporations have implemented this safety program exactly as specified in the DuPont manuals, and have called it "DuPont STOP." This program does have many positive features, and works quite well in some cultures. But many groups of employees have flatly rejected this approach to safety partly because they felt no personal ownership.

When employees learn the principles underlying a program and believe in those principles, they will willingly customize program procedures for their culture. They will give the program their own label, and work to keep the program relevant and evergreen. This results in perceptions of ownership and commitment, and helps to subdue the next common pitfall in safety programming.

3. Insufficient Bottom-Up Involvement

One of the most frequent questions I'm asked at our behavior-based safety seminars is "How can we get more people actively involved in our safety program?" It's obvious to most

that safety is not the responsibility of the plant safety director, but should be a shared responsibility among all employees. The line workers or operators are the true safety experts of a work setting. They know where the daily hazards are located, and they know what to do to avoid them. They also know who takes risks, and with proper training, they could be most effective at increasing these people's safe behavior and decreasing their at-risk behavior.

Actually, behavior-based safety (as well as "DuPont STOP") depends upon sharing program responsibilities among the workforce. The more people who implement program procedures (founded on the basic principle that behavior change requires interpersonal observation and feedback), the less remote is a Total Safety Culture. Thus, ways to maximize participant involvement need to be considered throughout program development and implementation.

Overcoming each of the pitfalls in this discussion is relevant to eliminating this barrier. For example, a program will attract more participation when it is perceived as founded on the right principles, customized and owned by the workforce, and fueled by a proactive need to achieve rather than a reactive need to avoid failure. Regarding this last point, program participation should be encouraged with positive consequences (such as personal recognition, group celebrations, and trinket rewards), and never forced with threats of punishment (commonly referred to as "discipline"). Program participation is also encouraged when the next roadblock is removed.

4. Invisible Top-Down Support

When an organization gets an opportunity to implement a new safety program, some management support is demonstrated. Management is covering the expense of program implementation, which includes giving employees resources and time off the job to learn

principles and guidelines, customize procedures, and implement intervention strategies.

However, it's critical that managers and supervisors show interpersonal support by verbalizing understanding and belief in the principles, and recognizing individuals and work teams for accomplishing program objectives.

When I give a series of company "kick-off" presentations for behavior-based safety programs, it's common for the plant CEO to introduce me. However, it's also common for this VIP to return to his office after the introduction. He might clarify that he heard one of my earlier presentations, and believes in the principles and the process. This is helpful, but the manager's departure can still signal a lack of personal commitment to some employees. On those occasions when the plant CEO and key supervisory staff sat through each of my kick-off presentations, program implementation was usually more effective and long term. This was partly due to visible management support, which in turn helped to eliminate the next pitfall.

5. Insufficient Champions of the Process

Managers or supervisors who willingly sit through three consecutive, two-hour presentations on behavior-based safety not only signal personal commitment, but will likely play significant leadership and facilitation roles throughout program implementation. They become champions of the process. A successful long-term program requires such leadership at all levels of the organization, especially at the operator level. When a few key individuals believe deeply in the principles and procedures of a safety program they will "walk the talk" and make sure the program continues.

I've seen no better way to develop champions of a process than to: a) teach potential leaders the principles and procedures, b) teach them how to teach the information to others, and then c) provide them opportunities to teach their colleagues and coworkers. When people teach,

they develop optimal understanding, commitment, and ownership for the principles and procedures they teach. In other words, teaching leads to the development of internal mental scripts that support the material taught, and this translates to behaviors that set the right example.

6. Mixing Goals with Purpose or Mission

Champions of behavior-based safety understand the difference between a purpose and a goal. Purpose reflects the mission of a safety program, whereas a goal defines a specific outcome targeted with a particular program activity or process. For example, the purpose of a safety program might be to achieve a Total Safety Culture and experience no injuries. In contrast, goals define achievable process outcomes that can be recorded and tracked throughout a particular program. The achievement of program goals is celebrated because it reflects progress toward the ultimate purpose or mission of a safety program. Indeed program success is demonstrated by the number of program goals achieved.

Mixing the meaning of program goals and purpose can be severely detrimental to a safety program. For example, I recently consulted with a champion of behavior-based safety who perceived his job was in jeopardy because his boss didn't understand the distinction between purpose and goal. This safety leader was feeling more pressure to avoid outcome numbers (recordable injuries) than to achieve higher program participation and impact. As a result, this person was being held accountable for numbers he could only indirectly control by achieving more program goals. His motivation, confidence, and optimism was being sapped because he feared evaluation on the basis of numbers beyond his direct and immediate control. This problem occurs whenever managers disregard the critical distinction between goal and purpose, expect quick-fix solutions to large-scale safety problems, and fall victim to the next pitfall.

7. Insufficient Measures of Program Success

In safety, the distinction between purpose and goal is linked directly to the measurement system used to evaluate an organization's safety performance. And, the confusion between purpose and goal is especially prominent in the safety arena because injury rate (total recordable and lost-time injuries) is the standard measure of safety success. In fact, for some companies these outcome measures are the only indices used to evaluate the success of a safety program. Company safety awards are based on these numbers, as well as the promotions and merit-pay increases of individual employees.

Basing safety success solely on injury rate has several drawbacks, including the fact that this measure can be readily manipulated for the purpose of "looking good." Employees can often hide an OSHA recordable (perhaps to assure receipt of a safety reward based on remaining injury free). Sometimes it's even possible to report that a lost-time injury happened off the job. Supervisors and safety directors might even encourage such cheating in order to influence the numbers on which their bonus depends. If employees learn of attempts to hide injuries they develop mistrust in the system and a belief that they cannot control the organization's injury rate. Obviously, this does little to support a safety program.

The development of process measures is key to increasing perceptions of interpersonal control of injuries. In order to be effective, safety programs require that certain activities occur on a regular basis. Participants need to be held accountable for completing these activities and achieving the outcomes which these activities *directly* influence. If the activities address factors related to injury reduction, then regular occurrence of these activities will eventually lead to a lower injury rate. But patience is usually a virtue in this case. For example, when employees believe they can reduce injuries and participate in an effective safety program to make that happen, the number of first-aid cases and near-miss reports will likely *increase*. This means

workers realize the reporting and investigation of incidents is a prime proactive approach to reducing future incidents. As a result, they stop hiding their personal injuries and near misses.

Behavior-based safety provides opportunities for systematically tracking a variety of process indices indicative of program success. In fact, the availability of objective and continuous measurement of program impact is a special strength of behavior-based safety. As I've discussed in prior articles for *Industrial Safety and Hygiene News*, the progress of a behavior-based safety program can be assessed by recording and tracking numbers of behavioral observations, percentage of employees volunteering to be observed, the number of coaching sessions conducted per week, and the percentage of safe behaviors per critical behavior category or per work area.

This is only a partial list of process measures which indicate program success. Achievable goals can be set for these indices, and observing progress toward reaching such goals can increase people's belief that they can make a beneficial difference in the injury rate of their organization. This increases people's feelings of program ownership, and commitment to keep the process going.

In Conclusion

Obviously, I have not given a complete list of roadblocks to effective implementation of a safety program. But these seven pitfalls do reflect key factors which determine whether teaching the principles and procedures of behavior-based safety will lead to long-term and large-scale success.

Thus, it's not enough to have a set of techniques which can reduce the at-risk behaviors causing most workplace injuries. The people who are vulnerable to personal injury need to willingly participate in the use of the techniques. For this to happen over the long term, the

seven pitfalls described here need to be overcome. This article offered some basic ways to do this. But, just as the list of roadblocks is inconclusive, so are the suggestions given here for getting around them. Hopefully they provide useful food for thought in your development, implementation, and continual refinement of programs to help people actively care for the health and safety of themselves and others.

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NOTE: At two-day seminars, Dr. Geller teaches techniques for optimizing the beneficial long-term impact of behavior-based safety. For more information, please call Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-SAFE (7233).