

The Acting Component of People-Based Safety™: Distinctions from Behavior-Based Safety

As introduced in my *ISHN* column last month, the components of People-Based Safety (PBS) – ACTS – provide knowledge, skills, and tools to address the human dynamics of industrial safety. In a Total Safety Culture, people *Act* for injury prevention, *Coach* one another to identify barriers to safe acts and provide constructive behavior-based feedback, *Think* in ways that activate and support safe behavior, and focus and scan to *See* the hazards.

Behavior Change is the Bottom Line

It's fitting the components of PBS spell "acts", because safety depends upon the actions of people. Various principles and procedures of PBS target attitudes, perceptions, and thoughts. But if improvement in these person states does not result in relevant behavior change, there is no benefit to occupational safety.

Because behavior change is the bottom line, behavior-based safety (BBS) has prevented workplace injuries in many organizations. People-based safety is not a substitute for BBS, but rather is an extension for greater impact. For example, the typical BBS process involves interpersonal observation and behavior-based feedback. But what about the many times people work or drive alone?

PBS adds to BBS by teaching ways to implement self-coaching and increase self-accountability for safety. In this regard, it's critical to understand the three forms of voluntary behavior—other-directed, self-directed, and habitual.

A BBS observation-and-feedback process initiates and sustains other-directed behavior. Workers increase safe behavior and decrease at-risk behavior because others – their peers – hold them accountable. With continued application of this coaching process,

the proponents of BBS hope safe behavior transitions from other-directed to habitual.

This objective reveals some critical distinctions between PBS and BBS.

Self-Direction is Key to Long-Term Behavior Change

Coaching is a key component of PBS, as I will discuss in my ISHN column next month, but interpersonal coaching is not sufficient. People are often alone in situations that require safe substitutions for at-risk behavior, and thus they need to coach themselves. This requires self-accountability and self-directed behavior. In other words, people need to believe in and own the safe way of doing things, even when the more risky approach is supported by soon, certain, and positive consequences like more comfort, convenience, and efficiency.

Self-direction requires internal justification for the right behavior. This happens when the external consequences supporting an action are not sufficient to totally justify the behavior. Too often people choose safe over at-risk acts only to obtain a reward or avoid a penalty. Programs that establish such contingencies often get the desired behavior while this accountability system is in place. But what happens when the external controls are unavailable?

The principles and procedures of PBS help people develop internal, self-accountability for safety, which leads to self-directed behavior – the optimal form for safety-related activities. The key is not to over-justify safe behavior with large incentives and severe threats, but to provide education, training, and experience that help people develop a sense of personal control over injury prevention. This includes an understanding that habits can be undesirable when it comes to industrial safety and health.

Safe Habits Are Not Ideal

The development of safe habits is a key objective of BBS. According to leading BBS trainers and consultants, the daily repetition of an observation-and-feedback process builds “habit strength” eventually resulting in the development of safe habits. This is good, but not ideal. Habits occur without mental awareness or thoughts, as when one buckles a vehicle safety belt without thinking about it.

Is there a disadvantage to putting oneself in automatic mode when the habit is safe? What if your buckle-up behavior is so habitual you don’t notice a passenger in your vehicle is not buckled up? You could miss an opportunity to actively care for the safety of others. And you miss an opportunity to develop self-talk or thinking that supports self-direction and self-accountability.

I’ll explain the connection between self-talk strategies and self-directed behavior in my *ISHN* column on the *Thinking* component of PBS this August. Here it’s pertinent to understand and believe in the value of accompanying our safe actions with relevant self-talk, even when the behavior is routine. I hope you agree self-directed or mindful behavior is more desirable than mindless, habitual behavior.

Stimuli Do Not Trigger *Voluntary* Behavior

I’ve heard many BBS trainers, consultants, and students claim that certain environmental cues “trigger” safe behavior. This language, and the accompanying dialogue, implies that stimuli elicit or cause safety-related behavior to occur. This is not true.

Some stimulus events cause involuntary behavior, as when the flashing blue lights of a state trooper triggers certain emotional reactions. But drivers choose to slow down

and pull over. Similarly, traffic lights do not trigger or cause intersection behavior, although they may cause an emotional rush following a driver's decision to speed through an intersection as the light changes from yellow to red.

Bottom line: There is a space between the stimulus (or activator) and voluntary behavior. Activators provide direction, but people *choose* whether to follow the direction. This choice is largely determined by perceived consequences and their relative importance to the individual. What positive consequence does the person expect to gain and/or what negative consequence does the person expect to avoid? Yes, this is the standard ABC (Activator – Behavior – Consequence) Principle of BBS, but PBS views this principle with consideration of the individual's beliefs, perceptions, and attitude.

The People-Based ABC Principle

I find the term “positive reinforcement” overused and abused by trainers and students of BBS. They seem to believe any pleasant consequence, from a monetary bonus to safety trinkets and interpersonal recognition, is a positive reinforcer. However a consequence is a reinforcer (positive or negative) only if it increases the behavior it follows.

Trainers and students of PBS realize the reinforcing power of a consequence is in the eye of the beholder. In other words, attitudes and perceptions determine the motivating potential of a consequence. For example, the meaning of a “safety trinket” to an individual determines whether such a consequence is viewed as positive, negative, or neutral and could motivate behavior (see my discussion of “safety mementos” in the February 2005 issue of *ISHN*).

It is usually impossible to determine whether the delivery of a consequence

actually influences the behavior it follows. Thus, the loose use of “positive reinforcement” among BBS consultants and students is risky and often inappropriate. With PBS this mistake is not made. The term “positive reinforcement” is not used in PBS, and the impact of positive consequences on feelings or person states is entertained and appreciated.

In PBS, positive consequences are considered “rewards,” and negative consequences are “penalties”. If these consequences don’t impact overt behavior, they will at least influence feeling states which is important in PBS. With PBS, rewards are delivered to increase self-esteem and perceptions of personal competence and control, as well as to improve behavior. Research shows these feeling states increase people’s willingness to actively care for the safety and health of others. Thus, PBS applications of the ABC Principle are directed to both external behaviors and internal person states.

In Conclusion

This article introduces a few key concepts of the PBS approach to behavior change. Distinctions between PBS and BBS are highlighted with discussions of: a) the PBS differentiation between other-directed and self-directed behavior; b) the PBS objective to achieve self-directed behavior rather than habits; c) the role of personal choice in the PBS application of the ABC Principle; d) the difference between positive reinforcers and rewards as behavior-based positive consequences, and e) the PBS consideration of feelings or person states when delivering positive consequences.

Next month I will continue to explain how PBS refines and extends the standard BBS concepts for greater impact on the human dynamics of occupational safety. More

specifically, I will specify advantages of a PBS approach to safety coaching over BBS coaching.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply the principles and procedures of People-Based Safety (PBS). Also, Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has recently published Dr. Geller's new book on PBS, as well as five video/CD programs, accompanied by workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please log on to www.safetyperformance.com or call us at 540-951-7233.