

## **The Benefits of a Behavioral Approach to Safety: *Back to Basics***

Last month I scrutinized the apparent focus on positive reinforcement in behavior-based safety (BBS). I specified critical distinctions between positive reinforcers and rewards, and pointed out flaws in the standard training protocol for teaching employees how to give interpersonal recognition.

My critique of the common steps given for delivering recognition, as delineated in numerous “pop psychology” books and at BBS workshops, was inspired by the book *Praise for Profit*, written by an experienced BBS consultant. In his 2005 book, Jerry Pounds questions his own 30-year history of teaching social reinforcement. He reports that thousands of managers and employees complained about the apparent manipulation and insincerity implicated in the applications of positive reinforcement he taught. And, he notes he and his colleagues had elaborate, self-serving rationales for dismissing negative reactions to their recognition training and consulting.

Last month I also offered an alternative approach to social reinforcement, which is consistent with Jerry Pounds’ perspective. Lest I give the impression Pounds and I are opposed to BBS, this month and next I present the strengths of a behavioral approach to industrial safety, as inspired by Pounds’ recent book. Although I have made each of these points in earlier *ISHN* articles, it seems worthwhile to review them again. They reflect behavioral basics which are often overlooked in teaching and practicing BBS.

### **1. Appreciate the Principles**

Often the only criticism I receive after giving a workshop or audio-conference on the psychology of safety is the lack of specific procedures a certain participant can use to reap the benefits of my teaching. Although I give real-world examples to illustrate

behavioral principles, I do not provide significant details for using a tool or procedure in the critic's work culture.

My job, however, is to teach the principles so participants understand and believe them. Teachers provide examples to support their mission, but don't give participants a protocol for their culture.

My vision is that participants will customize principle-related procedures for their workplace. A consultant can be useful during this knowledge transfer and adaptation process and throughout subsequent training of specific procedural steps. This reflects the distinction between education and training, as I discussed in earlier *ISHN* articles (e.g., Nov. 1996, Dec. 1999, and Dec. 2002).

Even now, I'm not presenting detailed strategies, but rather the basic principles of behavioral safety, with hopes you will incorporate them into numerous aspects of both your work and home life. BBS is not a procedure. It's a philosophy – a perspective relevant for understanding and improving the vast number of factors influencing the output of a system--at work, at school, and at home.

## **2. Use Behavioral Language**

This principle is fundamental, yet seriously overlooked in so many organizations. Indeed, ambiguous non-behavioral language is used ad nauseam in corporate vision and mission statements, management expectations, performance appraisals, interpersonal conversations, and on safety signs displayed throughout a workplace.

What is "world-class safety"? What does it mean to be "leading-edge" in safety? How does one "think safety" and bring a "safety attitude" to work? What is "self-initiative" and "self-accountability" with regard to safety or any other work challenge? How can you fairly evaluate another person on the common appraisal dimensions of

“self-motivation,” “enthusiasm,” “character,” “integrity,” “creativity,” and “emotional intelligence”?

If you want communication to affect what people do, you need to use behavioral language. Whether setting expectations, recognizing accomplishment, solving interpersonal conflict, or delivering corrective feedback, specify what behaviors are implicated. Don't presume people understand your definition of such emotion-laden labels as “risk taker,” “underachiever,” “overachiever,” “team player,” and “safety leader”. When you provide a list of desirable and undesirable behaviors that reflect your viewpoint, you put others on the same page and offer a prescription for performance improvement.

### **3. Connect Results with Behavior**

Most readers have heard the warning “Keep on doing what you're doing and you'll keep on getting what you're getting.” Yet managers and supervisors often discuss performance results without reference to behaviors. As a result, they miss an opportunity to recognize, correct, or direct specific action.

How often have you attended a safety celebration at which an exemplary system outcome is acknowledged – lower lost-time injuries or worker compensation costs – without any mention of the variety of behaviors contributing to the recognized results? Bottom line: By linking process behaviors to the observed results of a performance system, you not only clarify your perspective, you offer directives people can follow to meet your expectations.

### **4. Appreciate the Impact of One Behavior**

Jerry Pounds offers real-world examples from his consulting experience to show how changing the quantity or quality of one behavior can make a dramatic difference in

system performance. He illustrates the value of asking employees to define one thing they could do differently that would improve their performance output.

Behavioral checklists are so common in applications of BBS, some believe BBS is nothing more than observation and feedback with a behavioral checklist. The checklists can be overly complex, overly simple, or over-used. The BBS process can become a cumbersome and meaningless routine of checking “safe” vs. “at-risk” boxes on a laundry list of behaviors. This is better than nothing, because it defines the behavioral components of a work assignment, and holds people accountable for selecting safe alternatives.

But how often are relevant workers engaged in redefining behaviors and identifying new behaviors to target? When “percent-safe scores” reach 80% or when the process becomes a numbers game, it’s time to regroup and consider the principles behind this tool. Ask workers regularly to revisit their behavioral checklists and add or subtract critical behaviors. One behavior change can make a difference.

### **5. Apply Behavioral Accountability**

Using behavioral language is the first step in developing an accountability system for performance improvement. And a behavioral checklist is a tool that enables peer-to-peer accountability. Likewise, accountability is possible whenever coaching, corrective feedback, performance appraisals, or incentive/reward programs are behavior-based. Each behavior-based process can give behavioral directives, measure behavioral results, and give behavioral feedback.

The measurement and feedback tools of BBS are invaluable, and should not be taken lightly. They are essential for building skills and enhancing individual and group competence. Even when we are self-directed, we need to measure our relevant behaviors and benchmark with other people’s behaviors. This enables us to assess our progress at a

particular endeavor and set the kinds of specific goals that can activate improvement and provide accountability.

### **In Conclusion**

This presentation reviewed five basic principles of a behavioral approach to industrial safety, each relevant to improving the safety performance of any organization. Most safety pros have heard them before, and understand the value of each. And, they appreciate the relevance of behavioral language, accountability, and feedback to situations beyond the workplace.

Nevertheless, these principles are not practiced enough in daily work or home life. They are simple enough, certainly intuitive, and supported with plenty of research. Thus, while it's a challenge to overcome traditions of non-behavioral language in performance appraisals and other accountability systems, the outcome is well worth the effort. Next month I will review five additional principles of BBS that can not only benefit the prevention of workplace injuries, but can increase the competence of individuals and groups in any setting and improve the output of any system.

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Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply the behavioral approach for performance improvement. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has recently published Dr. Geller's new book: *People-Based Safety: The Source*, as well as five related video/CD/DVD programs, accompanied by workbooks and leader guides. For more information, please log on to [www.people-based-safety.com](http://www.people-based-safety.com) or call SPS at 540-951-7233.