

Benefits of a Behavioral Approach to Safety: *More Basic Principles*

Last month I reviewed five basic principles of the behavioral approach to occupational safety. Each of those fundamentals, including the use of behavioral language to define accountability systems and provide constructive feedback, is relevant for problem solving beyond the workplace and for more than injury prevention. Here I discuss five additional principles of behavioral safety, each relevant for increasing the competence of individuals and groups in any setting and for improving the output of any system. The first principle is critical for the success of the behavioral feedback and accountability tools presented last month.

Make Feedback Strictly Behavioral

It's easier said than done, but it is essential to separate behavior from person factors when giving and receiving feedback. Corrective feedback is not an indictment of one's personality or an indicator of a character flaw. Feedback must not be related to an individual's attitude, motivation, professional competence, or family history.

Feedback is only about behavior. Yes, responding well to supportive or corrective feedback can lead to improvement in attitude, motivation, competence, and even a personality state. But the purpose of feedback is only to pinpoint desirable and/or undesirable behavior. When this is realized by those who give and receive feedback, the beneficial outcome of behavioral coaching is maximized. There is room for improvement in most everything we do, but only by receiving and accepting behavioral feedback can we do better.

Incidentally, the common term "constructive criticism" is an oxymoron. How can you criticize and be constructive at the same time? For most people, criticism reflects something negative about a person's attitude, character, or personality—characteristics

presumed to influence behavior. But “constructive” implies positive change following the “criticism,” and sometimes a change in person factors beyond behavior is requested and expected.

Corrective feedback, as defined by this behavioral principle, refers only to behavior. When the focus is on behavior, without any implications of person factors or character flaws, feedback that gives specific direction can be constructive.

Learn by Observing Behaviors

In his classic 1996 text, *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance*, Tom Gilbert emphasized that behavioral observation is key to improving personal competence. Effective people do things differently. Effective managers act differently than ineffective managers. The best teachers demonstrate certain behaviors the average teachers do not.

I’ve heard several safety pros claim 10-20 percent of their workers contribute to 80-90 percent of their OSHA recordables and lost-time injuries. And, safety pros report many employees never get hurt. Behavior makes the difference. Productive workers who never get hurt nor put others at risk emit certain behavioral patterns or best practices dissimilar to those of workers who periodically suffer personal injuries.

Individuals can learn how to improve their own behavior by observing others, especially when they use a checklist that defines standards of desirable performance. The behavioral observations of behavior-based safety (BBS) benefit from this observational learning principle. Indeed, I’m convinced the remarkable success of BBS is due more to the learning and accountability aspects of interpersonal observation and feedback than by the “percent-safe” scores and graphs derived from compiling the checks on daily behavioral observation cards.

Examine Consequences to Understand and Change Behavior

The topic of “motivation” can be very complex, involving a variety of person-based unobservables like “personal drive,” “intention,” “self-esteem,” “self-affirmation,” “optimism,” “need to achieve,” “need for person control,” and even “free will.” Indeed, when offering advice on how to assess and increase personal motivation, self-help books refer to these constructs and more.

Research supports the validity of these motivational concepts, but their utility is limited, especially by people in work settings. The complexity of motivation is simplified and made practical with a behavioral approach. As defined by this principle, behavior is motivated by consequences. People act to gain pleasant consequences or avoid unpleasant consequences.

Inconvenience and discomfort are negative consequences that inhibit safe behavior, and convenience and efficiency are positive consequences that motivate at-risk behavior. These consequences are natural or intrinsic, in contrast to incentive/reward programs that attempt to motivate various inconvenient or uncomfortable behaviors with extra extrinsic consequences like a financial bonus.

Adding positive consequences to situations in order to motivate certain behavior can be costly in terms of money and administrative effort. Furthermore, it can be demotivational to discontinue a financial bonus or incentive/reward program. As a result, it's useful to understand and apply the principle of intrinsic reinforcement, as reviewed next.

Promote Intrinsic Reinforcement

Many recognition programs include extrinsic rewards to motivate the exemplary performance of a group or organization. In some cases, individuals are selected for special acknowledgement and given praise and a material reward for their noteworthy

performance. Sometimes this is done publicly at a group celebration. As I indicated in my *ISHN* column last month, this extrinsic approach to recognition is not optimal.

The most powerful recognition promotes intrinsic reinforcement. In other words, show interest in what people are doing, and you will help them appreciate the intrinsic consequences of this ongoing work behavior. All work produces results, but sometimes the output is not obvious or is taken for granted. When others point out the fruits of our labor, the labor can feel more worthwhile, meaning intrinsic consequences are noted and appreciated.

How does this relate to safety? What are the intrinsic reinforcers of taking extra precautions to do a job safely? Since injuries are generally rare, workers do not experience injury avoidance related to their safe behaviors. Through appropriate interpersonal recognition, the value of safety-related behavior can be realized, including the long-term natural consequences of setting the safe example for others to follow.

How about safety suggestions? Do employers continually offer practical suggestions for making their workplace safer, from modifying equipment or environmental conditions to making safe behavior more convenient? Such safety advice increases in quantity and quality when it affects intrinsic consequences. In other words, when workers see adjustments related to their safety suggestion, they are intrinsically reinforced and more likely to offer more suggestions.

Realize the Disadvantages of Punishment

As regular readers of *ISHN* know, I've decried the use of punishment in prior articles (for example, see the April 1999, April 1997, and November 1997 issues). Punishment does work when the undesirable behavior is followed by a soon, certain, and sizable punitive consequence. However, it's usually impossible to administer this kind of contingency, especially in a work setting. And, even when punishment can be

implemented appropriately, it can do more harm than good, as Drs. Jon Bailey and Mary Burch emphasize in their 2006 book, *Thinking Like a Behavior Analyst*.

Punishment promotes aggression, links negative affect to the punisher, and can disengage the punished person from an entire work process. Furthermore, the negative emotions promoted by punishment can spread to other workers and work settings.

In his 2005 book, *Praise for Profit*, Jerry Pound starts his critique of punishment with this memorable quote from Jack Welch, “When people make mistakes, the last thing they need is discipline: It’s time for encouragement and confidence building.”

When it comes to safety, it’s critical to learn from near hits and injuries, whether they resulted from mistakes or calculated risks. Punishment, incorrectly referred to as “discipline” in industry, will severely stifle the type of open and frank conversations needed for this kind of learning.

However, when conversation following an undesirable incident is viewed as corrective feedback and leads to observable change in process behaviors and/or environmental conditions, beneficial learning and intrinsic reinforcement are the rewards that increase the quantity and quality of future safety-improving conversation.

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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 or call SPS at 540-951-7233.