The Value of Teamwork for Behavior-Based Safety

Last month I discussed the concept of teamwork and introduced five interconnected perspectives people need to adopt if they want to get the most out of teams. And last May, my *ISHN* contribution addressed strategies for getting the most out of group meetings, which are essential for promoting and reinforcing the paradigms shifts needed for synergistic teamwork. In this article I present the rationale for developing effective safety teams by defining the special functions of seven different teams an organization can establish to capitalize on the injury-prevention potential of behavior-based safety.

Keep in mind that behavior-based safety is a philosophy or a set of principles that guide the development and improvement of procedures for preventing personal injury. It is a general approach for dealing with the human dynamics of occupational safety. Thus, any existing work team or, in fact, an individual working alone can use the principles of behavior-based safety to decrease the probability of personal injury.

The seven teams described below have been used successfully by Fotune 500 companies to translate certain principles of behavior-based safety into effective practice. Although each team has a unique purpose and completes certain tasks independent of other teams, no team operates in isolation. Each depends on the output of other teams to maximize the injury-prevention potential of behavior-based safety. As W. E. Deming taught us, teams need to work together to optimize the system.

The Safety Steering Team

A Safety Steering Team plays a critical policy-making, oversight, and general support function in developing and implementing behavior-based processes to achieve an injury-free workplace. Before creating a Safety Steering Team, it's important to look at the existing team or committee structure in your organization. You don't want to duplicate the efforts of the

safety department, or some other relevant standing committee. For example, a current

employee committee might be able to take on the responsibility of coordinating the various

aspects of behavior-based safety.

The Safety Steering Team is probably the largest of the behavior-based safety teams,

and should include representation from the various work levels in a plant or department.

Most of these team members are line workers or operators, although it's often useful to have

management representation on this team. My partners and I at Safety Performance

Solutions have seen the size and make-up of this team vary widely across work cultures.

Many consist only of union members and are quite large. However, the most common size

for the Safety Steering Team is 10 to 12 members. Some management representation on

this team facilitates obtaining the necessary and continuous support from supervisory

personnel.

Observation and Feedback Team

As I've described in earlier *ISHN* articles (e.g., December 1993 and January 1994),

behavioral observation and feedback is a critical component of behavior-based safety. There

are many effective ways to carry out an observation and feedback process, but all

procedures include a substantial amount of team interaction. The "DO IT method," for

example, is a team-oriented process whereby work teams meet on a regular basis to

complete each step.

They **D**efine critical safe and at-risk work behaviors to observe. Then they **O**bserve

each other work, completing a critical behavior checklist they developed as a team. Next,

they apply certain **I**ntervention procedures they select and design as a team to motivate more

safe behavior or less at-risk behavior. Then in the **T**est phase, they evaluate the results of

their intervention to determine whether another intervention is needed or whether they have

influenced enough behavioral improvement to warrant some additions to their critical behavior checklist.

Some observation and feedback procedures involve one-on-one behavioral coaching between two employees. The coach observes the work behaviors of another employee, with his or her permission. Afterwards, the coach tells the person observed what he observed, both the safe and at-risk behavior. The two individuals discuss what could be done to make the task safer in terms of behavioral adjustment or environmental change. This is teamwork accomplished by a two-person team.

Ideally, every employee in a plant who could be injured as a result of their work-related behavior should participate on an Observation and Feedback Team, if only as a person willing to be observed. In other words, the comprehensive application of observation and feedback requires all employees to receive some sort of systematic behavior-based feedback regarding their work practices. So this particular team, regardless of size, is relevant for every working employee of a company.

Ergonomics Team

The mission and methods of this behavior-based safety team is similar to those of the Observation and Feedback Team. The difference is that this team has special education and training in ergonomic principles. With these principles as a guide, the members of this team systematically audit work stations to evaluate relationships between work behaviors and the environmental setting. Subsequently, the team members discuss potential solutions to ergonomic challenges. They decide on particular corrective action plans and submit proposals to others. The recipient could be another team, one that can provide or assign the resources needed to make the ergonomic change. The adjustment could be a modification of

the environment, a process for training or motivating behavior change, or a combination of both an environment and behavior change.

There is potential for an invaluable synergistic relationship between the Observation and Feedback Teams and an Ergonomics Team. Every Observation and Feedback Team can look for mismatches between work practices and environmental conditions, and submit recommendations to the Ergonomics Team. This prompts the Ergonomics Team to do a careful observation and evaluation of the setting and determine whether a specific action plan is called for.

Incident Analysis Team

If an organization has a safety director or an "environmental health and safety officer," then incident analysis is probably a primary job assignment for this person. But there are advantages to making incident analysis a team effort. A comprehensive evaluation of "near-miss" reports, occurrences of property damage, and personal injuries can benefit from the input of a variety of individuals, including a safety director, an ergonomics specialist, and individuals with considerable experience in the work area where the incident occurred.

It's useful to have two or three regular members of the Incident-Analysis Team, and to add two or three additional members depending upon the particular circumstances of the incident analyzed. This would allow for special incident-relevant expertise, while also providing for plantwide representation and involvement on this critically important team.

The experience of serving on an Incident Analysis Team not only raises individual awareness of safety and health issues, it also alerts team members to specific preventive measures. Involvement on a team to investigate an incident so as to prevent it from recurring, increases each team member's knowledge about what to do for injury prevention

as well as personal commitment to do it. This intuitive outcome justifies the inconvenience of rotating membership of this team among as many line workers as possible.

Celebration Team

In a prior *ISHN* article (February, 1997), I discussed methods for getting the most out of a group celebration. Here I want to emphasize the value in using a team to plan group celebrations. Too often safety celebrations are planned by one person or a few managers who make a number of presumptions when deciding the particulars of the special event. Consider the advantages of having a team of line workers plan a safety celebration. This team will need a directive with some guidelines and budget restrictions, but this team should be empowered to plan the particulars of the celebration.

Team members will naturally solicit ideas from their coworkers, and the result will be an event more likely to please the people who deserve the group reward. Although the actual celebration might be very similar to that which would have occurred if one individual or a few managers had planned it, the occasion will feel more rewarding to the participants. The perception of personal control leads to more involvement. And with more involvement comes more commitment, and then more involvement, and so on.

Incentives/Rewards Team

Today most safety professionals realize the serious drawback of the traditional safety incentive program. You know how it goes. A work group is offered a certain reward for not getting hurt on the job. Sometimes the reward is a financial bonus or the selection of a gift from a prize catalogue. Or, perhaps an individual's reward for not being injured is a chance to win an attractive television set, pick-up truck, or snowmobile in a lottery drawing. Two often peer pressure to avoid an injury is implicated with the stipulation that all employees lose their prize if one person gets hurt.

In order for a safety incentive program to motivate the kinds of activities that can prevent workplace injuries, it needs to be behavior-based. In a prior *ISHN* article (November, 1992), I described methods for designing and administering a behavior-based incentive/reward program for safety improvement. Here I want you to consider the value of empowering a special incentives/rewards team to design, implement, evaluate, and refine a behavior-based safety incentive program.

Many decisions need to be made when developing a behavior-based incentive program, and the best answers to questions about design and administration are culture dependent. As such, appropriate representation from the work culture is needed to arrive at the optimal procedural details for a particular work setting. Plus, the planning and execution of an effective safety incentive program takes considerable time and effort, needing the multiple talents and contributions only a team can offer.

Preventive Action Team

In previous *ISNH* articles (April, 1994 and January, 1998), I discussed disadvantages of using disincentives or threats of negative consequences to motivate safe behavior. I frankly believe the only punishment contingency that can work to prevent injuries over the long term is one that penalizes people for not reporting injuries. Nevertheless, punishment policies exist in many work cultures.

My purpose here is not to argue for or against the use of punishment or "disciplinary action" to motivate compliance with safety rues or regulations. Rather, given the existence of a punishment policy, I want to suggest a special application of teamwork. Specifically, I recommend you consider using a Preventive Action Team to evaluate reports of rule/policy violations and decide on corrective action for environment, behavior, or the management system. With membership elected and representative of the entire work force, this team

decides whether an individual should be punished for an infraction, and chooses the particular penalty.

Given that line workers typically have the most direct influence over their peers, and that top-down safety discipline usually decreases voluntary involvement in desirable safety processes, the use of this type of team should at least seem logical and intuitively appealing. If a council of people representative of the entire work culture serves the fact-finding and corrective-action functions of safety "discipline," employee involvement would be increased rather than decreased by a discipline system. The team could offer the guidance, leadership, and counseling implied by the Latin roots of discipline -- disciplina which means instruction or training, and *discipulus* which refers to a learner.

In Conclusion

In this article I defined seven different teams an organization can use to implement behavior-based safety. It is certainly not necessary to establish all of these teams in order to capitalize on the injury-prevention potential of behavior-based safety. And these seven teams are not comprehensive. I'm sure you can think of other organizational teams which can use and/or deliver methods or procedures developed from the basic principles of behavior-based safety.

A important lesson from this discussion is that industrial safety can be dramatically improved through teamwork. Although all seven teams discussed here are not needed, at least the first two are essential. An employee-driven steering team for behavior-based safety is crucial for promoting increased employee involvement and commitment in a company's safety initiative. And since behavior-based observation and feedback is necessary to improve safety-related behaviors, some type of teamwork is necessarily implicated.

An interpersonal observation and feedback process implicates two-person teams, at the very least. But you'll get much more mileage from an observation and feedback process if work groups organize in teams to review the results of various interpersonal observation and feedback sessions and make recommendations, including the development of customized interventions to improve safety-related behavior. So, I hope one lesson is coming through loud and clear. We need teams and teamwork to get the best out of behavior-based safety.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor, Virginia Tech
Senior Partner,
  Safety Performance Solutions

NOTE: Dr. Geller has recently authored a book on "Building Successful Safety Teams" published by J. J. Keller and Associates. For more information on this book and related videotapes, audiotapes, seminars, and industry-based consultation, please call Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) at (540) 951-7233 (SAFE).