# **Effective or Outdated?** Behavior-Based Safety Concepts

*by Jonathan Jacobi*

Workplace health and safety depends on people. People are involved 100 percent of the time when work happens – including when work goes well and when things go poorly.

It's fitting that people are a focus in all successful health and safety programs. People-focused strategies include emphasis on leading indicators (predicated by the actions of people), accountability, observation and coaching with a bias toward positive recognition as a path to performance improvement.

Behavior-Based Safety (BBS) is a people-based approach that focuses on identifying, measuring, and making sense of the reasons for behaviors that influence safety performance.

It's been my experience that companies are divided in their opinions about behavior-based safety. Some lobby against BBS saying it blames people for safety issues. Some favor BBS as a way to learn what's driving safe and at-risk behavior. Others either don't understand the approach or have been hearing about the approach for decades and are simply ready to move onto something new.

Behavior-based safety, safety by design, safety management by walking around, principles of total quality management, lean, six sigma, high reliability, and human performance improvement – all of these approaches can be effective, but there's not one single approach that is right while the rest are wrong. Many companies adopt an approach that blends features of one or more of these approaches.

What motivates worker choices and actions (the subject of behavior-based safety) will ALWAYS be relevant to workplace health and safety. The following behavioral concepts are relevant for the present day and will NEVER go out of date.

**Environment and Experience**

Workers act as they do (for better or for worse) because of their environment and experiences. With this fact in mind, good investigators move beyond worker behavior as the sole cause of incidents.

As explained in UL's training course Safety & You, workers tend to follow how other people behave and think. For example, people don't usually come to work just whenever they want to; they come at the time they are expected to be there. They don't dress however they feel; they tend to dress in something that fits in with what others are wearing. At-risk behavior follows this same practice. Workers tend to behave as others do, and they behave in ways that are allowed by their employer, manager, and coworkers. So, when we talk about workplace conditions that encourage at-risk behavior, it often is within the reach of the manager to change workplace conditions and encourage safe performance.

Take, for example, workers who are not using their personal protective equipment (PPE). If it fits awkwardly or is not maintained, chances are workers won't use this equipment for their safety. It's the manager's job to help identify why the PPE is not being used and to work to remove these barriers. If the equipment doesn't fit right, the company needs to acquire better-fitting equipment.

Another way workplace conditions encourage at-risk behavior is through workload pressures such as tight schedules and excessive physical demands. Sometimes these pressures are explicit, but they can also be implied. For example, maybe managers don't TELL workers to take safety shortcuts, but if the schedule is not reasonable or production quotas are out of line, workers may try to save time by shortchanging safety. They may conclude that schedules or numbers are more important than anything else, including safety.

Another reason workers take risks is that they are unaware that their behavior is risky in the first place. They may never have been trained on the "safe" way – or they may have received training, but not retained the knowledge. There might be no reminders about safe practices. Managers and coworkers can be the source of these reminders by their actions and coaching.

The third reason workers take risks is due to basic human nature. Naturally, rewards and punishments favor at-risk behavior. That's because doing something the risky way is often faster, more convenient, and more comfortable. Even at-risk behavior can have positive outcomes like recognition by supervisors and coworkers that don't understand—or don't care—about the shortcuts taken.

Imagine you're on your way home and you're approaching a stoplight near your house. You know that this light takes a really long time to turn green – you're late, and you'd really like to be home. In the distance, the light turns yellow. What do you do? Push the accelerator a little harder or put on your brakes? Some people do the at-risk behavior of zipping through the light and almost always, nothing bad happens. The immediate reward is beating the light and getting home quicker.

Isn't it faster to move that heavy load yourself without taking the time to get someone to help you? Isn't it more convenient to use the closest tool at hand, even if it isn't exactly the right tool for the job? Isn't it more comfortable working without those safety glasses or earplugs than with them? Of course it is.

On the other hand, we have to admit that the chances of an injury resulting from any single at-risk behavior – moving something heavy without help just this one time, using the wrong tool just this one time, working without eye or hearing protection just this one time – may be very low. That's why people take these shortcuts. They think they can get away with it and most of the time they're right!

**Feedback and Coaching**

Performance feedback underscores the fact that worker safety (and doing things the safe way) matters to the organization.

Feedback following safe or unsafe work can influence the next choices workers make. It matters that workers receive feedback consistently. It matters that workers receive feedback soon after and behaviors are carried out. The type of feedback (positive, negative, sincere or otherwise) also matters. Soon, certain, positive, and sincere feedback is the strongest and most reinforcing feedback a person can receive.

The consistency of feedback plays a major role in how much feedback will influence future behavior. If feedback is inconsistent, uncertain or delayed, the response to feedback is also likely to be the same. Workers may begin to wonder if anyone will notice their hard work if feedback is inconsistent or uncertain. Positive feedback provided while the behavior is happening or soon thereafter can be very motivating as there will be little doubt why it's being provided.

When I think about the importance of positive affirmative feedback, I am reminded of a metaphor made by the late Stephen R. Covey. In Covey's best-selling book, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, he discusses the concept of maintaining an "emotional bank account." Using the bank account as a metaphor, Covey describes how deposits are positive actions that build trust and withdrawals are negative actions that diminish trust. He recommends always making more deposits than withdrawals. When an emotional back account is in the red, the ability to regain trust and work effectively is significantly hindered.

Corrective feedback and criticism may feel bad to the recipient even when comments were meant to be helpful. It's obvious why Covey viewed negative remarks as emotional withdrawals. If we want people to accept critical feedback, then we need to make sure we are offering positive affirmative feedback when we notice things being done well.

Feedback for safe work is especially important when you consider how motivating natural consequences can be for at-risk work methods. When the only consequences for unsafe work are positive, workers are likely to develop an "it won't happen to me" attitude and as previously stated, most of the time they will be right.

**Positive Recognition**

We can change the balance of feedback for safe and unsafe work to counter the positive natural consequences for at-risk work.

Many experts recommend 4-7 positive remarks for every negative remark. Achieving a healthy ratio of positive to negative feedback should not be that difficult as people generally do more things right than they do wrong. Commonly, however, we save ourselves time managing by exception and ignore good work being done. So reinforce safe behavior and reinforce it a lot!

Recognize everyone who contributes in a noteworthy way. Such recognition works best when it consists primarily of verbal praise.

It's best to give praise directly as soon as possible after observing safe work practices, that way workers can connect what they've just done with praise provided. It's also important to provide specific feedback, so the worker knows exactly what behavior to repeat in the future. Specific feedback, such as "nice job bending at the knees when you lifted that" comes across as more sincere than a general "keep up the good work."

Praise also comes across as more sincere when it recognizes behaviors that require extra effort.

One example of extra effort is when doing something the safe way is clearly more trouble than doing it the at-risk way, such as asking for help in moving a heavy load. It takes more time and effort to ask someone to help you lift a load than to simply do it yourself. However, we know what can happen in a split second if you lift a load that's too heavy – you may be paying for it in agony for the rest of your life.

In addition to praising someone for behaviors that require extra effort, it's also good to recognize when someone's safety behavior is improving. However, we don't want to overlook those stellar workers who do their job in a consistently safe way. They should get praise for their efforts, too.

**Appropriate Incentives**

Prizes awarded through drawings or bingo games focus attention on the prize rather than on the safety contribution. Games tend to reinforce the notion that luck determines safety outcomes. Such "gimmick" approaches can also send the message that you think workers must be bribed to work safely. In fact, feelings of accomplishment and genuine appreciation are powerful motivators that will keep people working without the need for gimmicks.

Top line activities drive bottom line results. Programs based solely on incident rate don't directly celebrate individual activities (or people) responsible for winning results. Not surprisingly, when specific contributions are not praised or rewarded, workers end up feeling like doing things the safe way doesn't matter very much. What's worse, when there haven't been that many accidents or incidents, managers may also begin to think everything is fine and employees are safe, when this may be the furthest thing from the truth.

OSHA has a problem with big-ticket awards that discourage reporting and since these prizes are provided infrequently. And after "millions of hours between lost time incidents" people may have completely forgotten the specific things they did to win awards. Again, uncertain and delayed consequences have relatively little motivational value.

When groups of people are rewarded, as is often the case with traditional incentive programs, those who worked safely may end up resenting people who worked at-risk and got the same rewards. In these situations, slogans such as "safety is everyone's responsibility" will only serve to deepen resentment. What's more, when specific contributions of specific individuals cannot be pinpointed, group incentives may lead to feelings of entitlement and dependence on incentives. Being able to answer the question "what did someone do to earn incentives" helps ensure incentives reinforce safe behavior rather than luck.

**Safety Discipline versus Safety Disciplinary Action**

It's much more effective to drive safe behavior using reward rather than discipline. Both do influence behavior, but reward gets you so much more. When you use the threat of discipline, people will only do the minimum amount needed to avoid the discipline. Why should they do more? On the other hand, as long as more and more effort leads to more and more reward, you'll get extra effort.

In terms of side effects, using discipline makes people feel bad, whereas using reward makes them feel good. Most managers, of course, would prefer high morale to low morale.

Firing, disciplining, or counseling employees will not fix system-related issues. Well-intentioned employees ambushed by superficial investigations naturally become fearful of the safety program. In this situation, minor incidents and errors will be suppressed. What's worse, managers are likely to take "less incidents" as a sign that disciplinary actions are working better than costly system-related fixes.

There's a place for disciplinary action in safety. When needed, follow a progressive discipline policy. Supervisors and managers who find disciplinary actions to be an unpleasant experience should instead focus on INSTILLING SAFETY DISCIPLINE into their daily work routine.

**Effective or Outdated? Behavior-Based Safety Concepts**

Behavior-Based Safety may be older and less trendy than newer approaches, but companies still need to consider what motivates workers and do something about it. Even though behavior-based safety isn't new, behavioral concepts are still alive, thriving, and producing results in nearly all successful approaches to workplace health and safety.  Consider the best features of multiple approaches (e.g., , lean, six sigma, human performance improvement) and implement what makes sense. Safety management should not be an all or none proposition and I personally hope that behavioral concepts will be adopted where you work.

**AUTHOR**

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