

## How To Deal With Observer Burnout

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*It can destroy your behavior-based safety efforts.*

Your new behavior-based safety process has successfully overcome major obstacles, has good management support, is accepted among the workforce, even has most supervisors on board. The number of observations hits the target and accident rates go down. Your initiative is a success!

A few months later, the number of observations decline. You ask observers if there is a problem and they say, "No, we're just busy and it's hard to get away to do observations." The problem doesn't seem serious, but the number of observations goes even lower and the whole process suffers.

Many behavior-based safety processes win the battles of support and startup and loose the war to observer burnout. Nothing is visibly wrong with the process in the way you have learned to describe 'wrong' during assessment and startup; but obviously, something is wrong. Observers are apathetic. They don't dislike the process; they simply don't do it regularly.

Many experts in the field call observer burnout the number one problem with behavior-based safety. In every major approach, the observer plays a vital role in either gathering data for safety improvement, giving one-on-one feedback, or both. The frequency and quality of observations is often the best indicator of the health of the process. Observer burnout is a threat to the very core of behavior-based safety.

But what happens to these observers? They start out excited and motivated to improve safety. Why do they slow down or stop doing their important jobs? There are five causes of burnout that are common to many approaches to behavior-based safety:

### **Root causes**

**Motivation-**Behavior-based safety establishes a process that reinforces and motivates employees to adopt safe behaviors. The same approach is seldom taken to reinforce and motivate observers to do observations. Observers seldom get feedback on their performance and little is done to add motivators or remove demotivators from the observation process. Most approaches simply rely on the observer to motivate others without receiving any motivation.

**Monotony-**The basic job of an observer at most sites is honestly, boring (BORING)! They are asked to grab a clipboard with a list of 15-25 behaviors and see if people are doing them or not. Most observers turn in their marked sheets and never hear of them again. The observation process is an unbroken chain of the same dull tasks.

**Confrontation**-Some consultants ask observers to give feedback on-the-spot to workers. This practice can be trying if the workers regularly disagree or challenge the observers. Often workers simply treat the observers as a nuisance and don't take them seriously. Constant confrontations during observations wear on observers' resolve over time.

**Mixed Signals**-When observers are asked to participate in the behavior-based safety process, they are usually given specific assignments and assured that they will be given time and replacements (if needed) to enable them to complete their tasks. If first-line supervisors resist freeing workers to do observations or production schedules make it difficult to get away, observers are torn between priorities. Many times stray comments by managers about production priorities make workers wonder what priority the safety process has in relation to other duties. If the priorities are not clear and the planning is not adequate to carry out the process, observers will be left to wonder and choose.

**Association**-Most processes send observers out alone and have minimal contact between observers and others in the process. The need for association is a strong and basic one and most processes don't fulfill this need for observers.

## **Possible solutions**

If you are planning a behavior-based safety process for your site or your observers in your existing process are burning out, try some or all of the following solutions:

- Analyze the ABCs of observations. Look at the existing antecedents and consequences of doing or not doing assigned observations. Remove negative consequences and add positive consequences. Work with antecedents. In many sites nothing really triggers the observation. Look for tasks, signals, or other things in the work day that could be used to tell the observer that it is time for doing an observation. Review the other recommendations below to see which ones help you trigger and reinforce your observers.
- Hold observer meetings with the steering team. Give observers regular feedback on their performance and discuss obstacles to successful observations. Constantly reinforce levels of expectation about the frequency and quality of observations.
- Create a backup system for observers. Have a designated substitute observer for those weeks or days when the workload gets too high or other factors make it difficult to do assigned observations. Backup systems don't let observers off the hook or lower levels of expectation if designed thoughtfully.
- Pair observers with each other or with steering team members occasionally. This will give them support and a forum to discuss difficulties or reluctance to do the job. It also provides a valuable reality check to observations done alone.
- Involve observers in problem solving. Let them see what the steering team does with the data they gather and make them part of the problem-solving process. Give them special assignments to study safety issues for the team and propose solutions or gather ideas from the workforce.
- Focus the observers on a narrow agenda of behaviors. Just because the team identified 15 to 25 behaviors that need to be modified doesn't mean observers

cannot focus on a few at a time. A narrower focus helps the workforce master new behaviors more easily and completely.

- Rotate observers regularly and systematically. Ask observers to serve for 6 to 12 months and rotate one fourth of your observers each quarter. Use outgoing observers to train and/or coach new observers or use old observers as backups for new observers who cannot do their observations on a particular day.
- Work continuously with supervisors to facilitate observations. Don't think one meeting with supervisors will do the trick. Think of getting supervisor support as a process rather than an event. Hold regular meetings and give supervisors a chance to complain, problem-solve and learn more about the process. Share results and slowly build buy-in. Many supervisors were bypassed when consultants sold management and implemented programs with the rank and file. Re-involve them in support and problem-solving over time.

Finally, the best way to manage observer burnout is to anticipate it and prevent it from becoming a part of your process. If you are just beginning a behavior-based approach to safety, you have this luxury (and responsibility). If you are already started and seeing the symptoms, diagnose quickly and take steps to keep this disease from crippling or killing your safety efforts.

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