

Motivating employees to accept a behavioral safety process

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It's not about pointing blame

Is behavioral safety just another way to blame workers for accidents? This question comes up almost every time I've talked to workers or union leaders. These perceptions can seriously jeopardize the success of a behavioral safety effort because the process depends on the participation of motivated employees to make it work. Why is behavioral safety sometimes seen as a code for let's-blame-the-worker? Here are six factors:

1. Just the word "behavior" alone carries negative connotations. How often do we talk about behaviors in a positive light?
2. Most behavioral safety approaches include references to studies from the DuPont Company or the National Safety Council that indicate the causes of most industrial accidents (up to 96 percent in some studies) are the unsafe acts of workers. Very few industrial accidents are caused by unsafe conditions, according to these studies. But a closer look at these studies reveals that they were aimed at finding methods of prevention-not the root cause of accidents. If accidents could be prevented or lessened in severity by the action of any employee, the accidents were classified as "caused by unsafe acts." The fact that accidents can be behaviorally prevented doesn't necessarily mean that behavior is the root cause. Unfortunately, these studies have fueled perceptions that worker behavior is to blame for accidents.
3. Behavioral safety can suffer from what I call the "plane-crash mentality." For years, investigators always classified these accidents as either due to a mechanical failure or pilot error. Many employers only consider these two alternatives when investigating accidents. So workers look for unsafe conditions to avoid blame, and investigators scrutinize individual behaviors. Given this mind set, when management announces the start of a behavioral safety process many workers instantly conclude that unsafe conditions will no longer be corrected and workers will now be automatically blamed for all accidents.
4. Statistical Process Control (SPC) tells us when systems are in statistical control (the variation is within control limits), defects (undesired results) do not have a special cause; they are common to the system. The same holds true for safety. If accidents (undesired results) are in statistical control, their causes are not special, one-time behaviors or conditions but are rather common to the system. When we investigate to find special cause, we insinuate that workers have done something unusually dangerous and are to blame.
5. Observing employees while they work-an integral part of behavioral safety-can be sometimes viewed as "spying." The tradition of sending "safety cops" through the workplace to find rule-breakers and punish them has left its mark. Workers might suspect that the only reason anyone would watch them is to find fault and place

blame.

6. Finally, the perception that behavioral safety is a blame game is occasionally the truth. The impetus to implement a behavioral initiative sometimes does come from the assumption that workers are to blame for accidents.

These barriers-old traditions, suspicions, assumptions, misinterpretations-must be confronted if you're going to have motivated employees participating in a behavioral approach. One way of doing this involves performance management. Behavior doesn't occur in a vacuum, according to performance management principles, it's most often triggered by powerful organizational forces. W. Edwards Deming said behavior is determined by the system in which it takes place. But too often the mistake is made to try to change behaviors without addressing the forces that influence them. Isolated training programs are a common example, and any behavior change that occurs as a result is almost always temporary. Here is a performance management blueprint that can prevent behavioral safety from becoming a blaming process:

Before you begin

If you haven't started a behavioral safety process, you can take these steps to keep it from falling into the blaming trap.

1. Thoroughly assess your site before doing anything. Is your accident frequency in statistical control? Call on a statistician or use a computer program on statistics if you need help here. If the frequency is in statistical control, reducing it further will likely mean changing one or more of the systems that influence workers' behaviors.
2. Gauge employees' state of mind through perception surveys and discussion groups. You'll find out what employees think of current safety practices, and how open they are to new methods. Any workplace cultural tendencies toward the blaming mind set will usually come to light. You can't move ahead without tackling any of these issues. (A complete guide and forms for an organizational safety assessment can be found in the book, "Developing A Safety Culture," J.J. Keller, 1996.)
3. Make sure observation data will be kept confidential and not used for any punitive purpose.
4. Alert members of behavioral safety teams that the blame game is a potential problem and that it should be anticipated and managed. Don't let them be ambushed by suspicious or resistant employees. A management liaison should be assigned to teams so concerns and problems can be taken straight to the top-the only place where they can be resolved.

Starting up

During implementation, your whole organization needs to be part of the process.

1. Every level of management, area of responsibility, and department can define and fulfill a role that either supports or directly implements the behavioral effort. This kind of involvement requires a thorough understanding of the process and training in the basics of the behavioral approach.
2. During initial training, hold management briefings to address the problem of blaming and explain how damaging it can be. Focus attention on prevention and away from punishment.

Once you've begun

After a behavioral safety effort is underway, support is the name of the game.

1. Enhance and enrich programs and practices that recognize and reinforce safe behavior.
2. Any rules, job descriptions, or organizational structures that encourage blaming and punitive actions should be redirected away from the average worker who is trying to be safe and focused on habitual and repeat offenders.
3. Use observation data to determine why workers take risks. Some of these reasons will be organizational influences. Identify and work to remove forces that discourage safe behaviors.
4. Publicize your successes in this area so workers see progress and are aware of new organizational guidelines and structures.

If blame is a problem ...

If your behavioral safety process is under way and you find that it's becoming a finger-pointing exercise, here are some steps to get you back on track:

- Acknowledge that a problem exists and assure workers that it will be solved. Be clear that blaming is for serious offenses of neglect or willful violation and not to be used as a tool for day-to-day improvement of safety performance. ·
- Give supervisors alternative tools for handling safety issues that focus on prevention rather than blame, and give them feedback to help monitor their progress. Schedule regular reinforcement meetings and/or training sessions. ·
- List the actions your organization needs to take to replace blaming with prevention. Recognize and celebrate the accomplishment of these steps. Set realistic time lines for accomplishing the change. ·
- Continually ask workers and supervisors how the effort is going and what is getting in the way of progress. Review this data often and attempt to remove obstacles and add reinforcers. ·
- Involve as many employees as possible in working toward a solution. Involvement creates buy-in and will help to solve the problem faster and give the process added support once the problem is solved. There is a natural tendency to

place blame for accidents. It is not difficult for this tendency to find its way into your behavioral safety efforts. Once there, it acts like a cancer attacking the vital employee motivation and involvement needed for success. Examine your future plans or your existing program and determine whether or not you need to take the prescribed treatment.
