

## Street-smart behavior-based safety

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*It's time for the theory to get real*

Over the past eight years behavior-based safety (BBS) has grown from an interesting idea into a process being used at thousands of sites around the world. To improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of the process, we need to take off the blinders of academic approaches and look at the reality of the workplaces in which we are implementing BBS.

For BBS to move to the next level, it needs to get street-smart. The theory is proven. It's time to turn the theory into a product adapted for the business world. Here are four ways:

### **1) Use better language**

The behavioral science foundations of BBS, evident in terms like critical behaviors, antecedents, behavior modification, conditioned response, and others, are not only confusing, but sometimes offensive to workers. The very use of the term behavior suggests to workers and unions that the process focuses on individuals rather than on management, the organization or the work environment. This terminology, combined with past safety efforts that have focused on discipline, suggest that BBS is an approach to blame workers for safety problems. These assumptions are not true, but present a real challenge to change and correct them during implementation of BBS.

Other terminology that comes not so much from the science as the academic environment is equally troublesome. Terms such as steering committee can be less than effective in team environments. The term culture is one that is widely misunderstood and becomes the target of jokes in the workplace.

If workers are going to run a process, the words used need to be descriptive, comfortable and widely understood. The connotation of words can change significantly from location to location. Your BBS process terminology needs to be examined and changed if necessary.

### **2) Get faster results**

Like many academic theories, BBS was designed to create an idealistic change. The research indicates that changing behaviors and organizational culture can be very time-consuming - so organizations have been asked to patiently begin the process and not expect results for months or years.

Many implementations seem designed to maximize consultant days on site and to sell training materials by the pound. Training techniques are typically low-tech, as are data management systems. Much of the training is done in the hope of increased employee involvement and ownership. The same levels of involvement are easily attainable by having workers modify existing material rather than develop it from nothing. Street-smart trainers and consultants can drastically reduce the time required for startup while actually improving the results.

Street-smart implementers can almost always fashion processes to attain both short-term and long-term results. In fact, "quick wins" are an important strategy to start and build momentum in any new process or program. Quick wins are NOT the opposite of permanent gains. In fact, the two are inseparable parts of any well-designed organizational change initiative.

### **3) Reduce the costs**

The average price of consulting services for BBS is significantly higher than that of other consulting services. Newcomers to the marketplace have quickly realized in recent years that they could compete with the major consulting firms precisely because of the inflated price. There are now probably more insurers and professors in the field than there is expertise among that group; but still the prices of consulting services are high.

High consulting fees are only half of the equation. The other half is the use of internal resources. Startup of a BBS process can involve the use of hundreds of employee-hours in training and meetings. High-impact training and the use of modular implementation kits can greatly diminish the hours needed for startup without reducing the effectiveness or employee ownership. These techniques are used for many other organizational activities and are well suited for BBS.

### **4) Improve integration**

Consultant Dan Peterson recently suggested that most safety programs are what he calls "islands of safety." They are stand-alone programs with no real connection to the rest of the organization except some shared personnel. BBS is an example of such "islands." It is something else organizations do; not how they do it. BBS steering teams often find themselves in competition with other safety efforts for time, manpower and budget.

BBS must become an integrated part of the company culture and values and help to define "the way we do things around here." It is difficult to own a process that you simply lease or license from a consultant. People tend not to take the same pride in a process if it truly does not belong to them or even to their company. Street-smart implementers know that workers need to truly own a process if they are going to use it to make meaningful change.

