



## Why Behavior-Based Safety Must Change or Perish And What The New Model Will Look Like

Author – Terry L. Mathis  
Founder & CEO – ProAct Safety

Behavior-Based Safety (BBS), as it has come to be called, has been a very successful intervention for reducing accidents. Many organizations have tried it with success and others would have tried it except for its high costs both in terms of external and internal resources. Others have chosen deliberately not to use Behavior-Based Safety precisely because of these high costs.

In today's climate of lean manufacturing and downsizing, Behavior-Based Safety is becoming a dinosaur in real danger of extinction. Like dinosaurs, Behavior-Based Safety has changed relatively little since its inception in the mid 1980s. It is artificially expensive to hire expert consultants and the methodology is very liberal with the use of workers who must be excused from their regular jobs to do the "process." Behavior-Based Safety has been effective but not efficient.

If Behavior-Based Safety is going to survive, must less thrive in the current business environment, it is going to have to change in some real ways. An examination of current methodology reveals a number of ways in which it could change to better meet the demands of the business world as it has become.

### **Behavior-Based Safety Must Become "Lean"**

The amount of money spent on external consultants often wanes in comparison to the amount spent on internal resources necessary for Behavior-Based Safety. Sites have calculated as much as 1,000 work/hours of training per 100 employees to get the process started and 100-200 work/hours per month to keep it going. A typical Behavior-Based Safety process has a steering committee or team which receives days of training and workshop activities to get the process started and several hours per month for the term of the process. In addition to this team, observers are selected from the workforce who can include as much as 100% of the workforce. These observers may take from one half hour per week to three hours per week to complete their observations. Many sites give observers overtime to complete observations.

Lean workforces struggle to spare this many people away from their regular duties. Experimental sites have been able to accomplish Behavior-Based Safety with far fewer people and still produce dramatic results. Leadership teams/committees can be downsized or replaced with facilitators. Observations can be performed in larger blocks by fewer observers which reduces preparation and observation trip time. Checklists can be focused on fewer behaviors or precautions, which speeds and simplifies the observations. Feedback can be separated from observations or limited and targeted to save additional time.

### **Behavior-Based Safety Must Become Union Friendly**

Unions have been among the critics of behavioral safety initiatives claiming that it tends to blame workers for accidents and provide an avenue for management to abdicate its rightful role in safety leadership. These claims are truer at some sites than others. Some sites have done remarkably better at making Behavior-Based Safety a fact finding rather than a fault finding process. Some site leaders have taken an active role in safety leadership and others have stepped back hoping that Behavior-Based Safety would solve their safety problems.

Experimental Behavior-Based Safety processes have successfully tried several techniques to win union support:

- Omit all behaviors from the checklist that overlap with safety rules and procedures. This eliminates the danger of using Behavior-Based Safety for disciplinary purposes. Everything on the checklist is discretionary and non-punishable.
- Separate the observations from the feedback. Have an observer "sweep" the organization for measurement and use this data to focus peer coaching only in areas where improvements are needed. Some sites have even used salaried observers in this role to eliminate the perception that a climate of union members spying on other union members would be developed. Union members were used as coaches, but not to gather data.



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- Site management only views the identified, prioritized items provided to them by the hourly team members to fix the problems and not just to fix the blame.
- Observations are used to find unsafe conditions as well as concerning behaviors.

Even non-union sites have benefited from these and other techniques.

### **Behavior-Based Safety Must Become Professional**

One of the weaknesses of traditional Behavior-Based Safety is that it uses amateurs to perform expert duties. This is especially true in the area of data analysis and problem solving. Employee teams/committees have been charged with analyzing the behavioral observation data (sometimes coordinating it with ongoing accident and near-miss data) and using their findings to continuously improve safety and solve identified problems. Most employee teams have no expertise in data analysis or training in statistics and fail to accurately identify and/or prioritize their safety problems and opportunities. Some teams spend hours pouring over data and fail to really understand what they are looking at. Even teams who identify problems are seldom empowered to solve them and workers hesitate to take issues to managers and ask for help.

In new Behavior-Based Safety experimental sites where the trust levels and culture supports, the data is analyzed by someone with both the training and the expertise to identify issues and distribute data to the right person or level at the site that can potentially solve the problem. Most Behavior-Based Safety processes identify a lot more than concerning practices or behaviors. They identify systems issues, unsafe conditions, training deficits, organizational and cultural issues, problems with management and supervision, and even safety rules and procedures that don't work. Much of these issues are never identified or addressed by employee teams and the opportunity costs of such omissions are significant.

The traditional thinking is that the data must be seen only by workers to keep it anonymous and separated from discipline. Many techniques have been developed to solve this problem and still allow for more expert analysis and use of the observational data. The same issues that apply to data analysis and problem solving often apply to observation and feedback and innovative sites are finding ways to improve observation and feedback expertise, while reducing resource requirements.

### **Behavior-Based Safety Must Include True Safety Leadership**

Behavior-Based Safety has focused on changing what it has called the safety "culture". The traditional Behavior-Based Safety vision of this ideal culture is at the heart of the problem. The ideal Behavior-Based Safety culture is self-directed with almost no management intervention and is replete with workers who have time to effectively communicate with each other about safety issues. Behavior-Based Safety has a leadership team which meets independently and a team or teams of observers who regularly take time away from their jobs. Managers are asked to support and not interfere with the leadership team or steering committee while supervisors are charged with "empowering" the observers.

In reality, many of the Behavior-Based Safety processes have stopped far short of creating a new culture and have instead produced a new cult. The workers involved in Behavior-Based Safety create a new clique in the organization that enjoys immunity from normal management and supervisory scrutiny. Managers find they have diminished ability to influence the safety priorities and activities of the workers. The gap between leaders and workers widens.

Any safety culture should involve all levels in the organization and use the levels in the way they can best serve. Leaders should establish goals and direction and workers should use their abilities to find better and safer ways to accomplish organizational goals. All safety efforts should be integrated and great care should be used not to create separate activities that separate and alienate levels of the organization from each other. Even some of the Behavior-Based Safety experts who purported the traditional approach are recanting and acknowledging the importance of leadership in successful Behavior-Based Safety processes.



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**Conclusions**

Sites that are looking at implementing Behavior-Based Safety should consider alternatives and not just look at the traditional approaches. Some of the innovations could make Behavior-Based Safety a viable process for sites where traditional Behavior-Based Safety simply would not work, or fit.

Sites that already have a Behavior-Based Safety process are encouraged to consider putting their processes on a diet. Even if it currently works, it may be too large and ineffective. Look at innovative ways to downsize and realign resources. Use site expertise in data analysis. Look for innovative ways to streamline observations and make your process more union friendly and supported. Above all, keep leadership in an active role in the process and make the process integrate into your existing organization and safety efforts. Your Behavior-Based Safety process is not extinct yet!