Increasing Employee Engagement in Safety

Organizations are increasingly seeking ways to increase employee engagement for safety to take them to the next level of safety performance. To this end, the current article will address the development of innovative programs for safety, the role of mentoring for newer employees, and the impact of Behavior-Based Safety (BBS) to increase employee engagement for safety. Specific BBS issues include:

- Guidelines for implementing and optimizing BBS
- Recommendations for following up on BBS data
- Techniques to improve corrective and rewarding safety feedback
- Increasing key groups’ (managers, hourly etc.) support for BBS
- Optimizing BBS participation
Introduction

The first step in increasing employee involvement for safety is hiring conscientious employees who care about safety. Unfortunately, some managers complain that their companies simply hire “warm bodies” or “anyone who can pass the drug test.” Others point out that selection practices are limited to brief interviews and a cursory resume examination. Organizations with elite employees normally offer competitive salaries and often use an array of selection tools, including cognitive (intelligence) tests, personality tests, biodata instruments, assessment center exercises, vocation tests (when appropriate) and/or structured interviews (Spector, 1996). Structured interviews involve managers asking all prospective employees standardized questions during interviews which are behaviorally anchored and based on prior job analyses (Cascio, 1998).

Once employees are in place, effective training and development is needed to cultivate and maintain desirable employee behaviors and attitudes. This is especially true with safety. Optimizing safety culture requires active employee engagement for safety. It’s imperative that employees provide each other corrective feedback when risky behavior is identified, especially since safety shortcuts are often human nature (i.e., faster, easier) and because supervisors aren’t always around. This corrective feedback also sets the norm that safe behavior is expected. In weaker organizations, safety shortcuts become the norm (“Forget about training, this is how we really do things around here.”) which gets passed down from generation to generation. To counter this, specific safety efforts should target safety culture improvement and hourly employees should be heavily involved in these efforts. This helps increase personal responsibility and employee buy-in for safety (Geller, 2005).

Innovative Programs Increase Employee Involvement
Leading organizations find creative ways to increase employee involvement for safety. For example, one Virginia company used money they had budgeted to purchase safety posters and gave it to select employees via a poster design contest. Specifically, the site shut down all operations for 2 hours and brought in all employees to create their own safety posters. Prizes were given out for first ($100), second ($50) and third place ($25) as voted on by employees. Employees were given flip chart pages and markers/crayons to design their posters and were allowed to make as many posters as they wanted to for the contest. Employees really liked the idea. In the end, the winning employee was a maintenance worker who drew Forrest Gump running down the road wearing safety glasses (and other PPE) under the caption, “Safety IS as Safety DOES.” Completed posters were hung up around the facility and were highly effective in getting employees’ attention.

In another example, a company in West Virginia was struggling to increase employee participation in filling out environmental audits and behavioral observation cards. Roughly 1 in 5 employees regularly filled out these cards. In response, the company decided to donate ten cents to the local Boys’ Club for all completed cards. Within 6 months, the company had raised nearly $40,000 and participation rates had climbed to nearly 90%. Our experience has been that special programs focused on community service and family are highly effective in increasing employee involvement for safety.

Other organizations emphasize wellness programs to promote employee health and safety. One company in California conducts regular safety fairs where employees go (with their families) to eat healthy food, receive back and foot massages, and get various health checks completed (e.g., blood pressure tests, cholesterol checks). This organization also has a state-of-the-art gymnasium with incentives for employees to use it. They also pipe in new-age music every couple of hours. For 2-3 minutes, employees stop what they’re doing and begin stretching (to combat fatigue and repetitive motion injuries). When the music stops,
employees go back to work. In general, creative programs safety programs can be used to facilitate employee involvement in safety.

**Mentoring**

In addition to innovative safety programs, effective mentoring between highly experienced and highly inexperienced employees is extremely important to facilitate employee engagement in safety. This is especially true when companies have large numbers of retiring employees who may (or may not) pass on their detailed, craft knowledge to new hires. Also, many companies don't backfill these positions which leaves remaining employees to do more work with less people.

To formalize mentoring, one organization implemented a “buddy for a week” system. Essentially, an experienced employee (with high job knowledge and a good attitude for safety) spent one week with a new hire working together, eating together etc. This process met with general acceptance from employees and helped to: pass on job specific knowledge, provide hands-on training, improve rapport between newer and older employees, and generally decrease the “us vs. them” mentality between groups.

**Behavioral Aspects of Injury Prevention**

Employee involvement for safety can be increased through behavioral safety efforts. Also, organizations are increasingly focusing on safety behaviors to reduce injuries. In fact, most injuries are due, in part, to at-risk behaviors (Williams & Geller, 2000). In order to reduce injuries, it's important to understand why employees take shortcuts.

Here are some fundamentals regarding employees' safety behaviors:

- It's usually faster, easier, and more comfortable to do things in a risky manner.
• Organizations may also encourage risky behaviors by scheduling excessive overtime, not fixing equipment problems, providing insufficient safety training etc.
• Despite this, employees often operate safely because they don’t want to be injured, get in trouble, and/or because they take pride in doing things safely (even if it takes longer).
• We can influence ourselves and others to operate more safely by selecting good employees, training them well, and encouraging peer feedback.

**ABC Model**

Behavioral psychologists (especially in the safety field) frequently use the **ABC** model to explain at-risk (and safe) behaviors (Geller, 2008, 1998). Basically, Activators or antecedents get our attention to Behave in a certain way. This leads to Consequences (which ultimately motivate our behavior). Activators include safety signs, meetings, rules etc. Behaviors (safe or risky) are observable actions and include using a safety harness, locking-out power etc. Positive consequences include going home safely and personal pride (for safe work practices). Negative consequences include injuries and reprimands (for risky work practices). Also, consequences are considered strong or weak. Strong consequences are probable, soon, and significant and weak consequences are improbable, delayed, and insignificant.

Here’s a quick analysis using the ABC model to help explain an at-risk behavior (grinding without a face shield).
Activators that encourage face shield use include safety signs, training, and supervisor presence. Activators that encourage not using a face shield include time pressure, scratched face shields, and a lack of availability.

Consequences that encourage face shield use include not getting an eye injury and not getting in trouble. It is improbable that an employee will be injured or get in trouble for grinding without a face shield (although these consequences would be soon and significant). Because these consequences are improbable, they lack strength.

On the other hand, consequences that discourage face shield use include saving time, better vision, and more comfort. All of these consequences are probable, soon, and significant which means they’re strong (and we’re likely to follow them). In other words, the natural consequences are stronger for not wearing face shields than for wearing them. In general, the natural consequences for risky behavior outweigh the natural consequences for safe behavior. This is true for numerous behaviors, including: safety harness use, forklift speed, smoking cigarettes etc. This explains why employees often take safety shortcuts.

**Behavior Based Safety (BBS)**

Because people are naturally inclined to be risky, it is important that employees be their “brothers'/sisters' keeper” for safety. Behavior-Based Safety can be an excellent process to increase employee involvement for safety. BBS encourages peers to provide safety feedback to one another. By observing safety-related behaviors, employees point out risky behaviors that may lead to injury. They also praise and reinforce safe behaviors performed. In addition to one-on-one feedback, group (behavioral) data in the form of graphs and
charts is provided to help reduce risky behavioral trends and reinforce safe behavioral trends (Geller & Williams, 2001)

In a nutshell, BBS is implemented as follows:

1. Train Managers and Supervisors on the principles and practical applications of BBS to improve safety culture.

2. Put together a Steering Team to manage the BBS process. This team should have representation from hourly employees (and union leaders if applicable). This team receives comprehensive BBS training which includes BBS process development (creating an observation card, determine rules for using the card, defining roles and responsibilities of key groups to make the process successful etc.).

3. Members of this team (in house trainers) are taught how to provide BBS training to hourly employees (or outside consultants provide this training). After all hourly employees are trained, formal observations begin. All hourly employees should be observed and should be encouraged to be observers.

4. Employees begin observing coworkers and providing safety feedback.

5. Steering Team members collect observation cards, enter observation information into a data base, and analyze the results.

6. Monthly BBS data is provided to managers/supervisors/employees through safety meetings, bulletin boards etc. The Steering Team identifies improvement activities from the data.

7. Periodic assessments of BBS progress are conducted. The process is streamlined and adjusted as needed.
When implementing BBS processes, it is crucial that the process is: employee designed and led, anonymous and confidential, non-punitive (no-name/no-blame), and focused on long term success (vs. flavor of the month or magic bullets).

The DO IT Process

Our organization uses a 4-step DO IT process (D=Define, O=Observe, I=Intervene, T=Test) to follow-up on problem areas from the BBS process. The Steering Team defines behaviors that need improvement from a baseline of observation data. The team works with hourly (and other) employees to develop interventions to improve the defined behaviors and then tests to see if the interventions worked. If so, they define other behaviors to address. If not, they brainstorm new intervention ideas to try with the problem behavior.

For instance, one oil company had problems with glove use. After 3 months using the observation cards, the Steering Team found that employees only wore their gloves 25% of the time (D = Glove Use, O = Observe for 3 Months to Find 25% Use). Rather than mandating glove use at all times, they chose to talk with their employees to find out how to get them to wear their gloves more often. They brainstormed and implemented the following intervention (I) ideas:

- Provide better fitting gloves
- Make the gloves more accessible
- Provide hand injury testimonials at tailgate meetings
- Set a goal of 85% glove use for 6 months
• Convince the Safety Director to shave his head if the aforementioned goal is met

Not surprisingly, the last criterion was most strongly embraced by employees (and begrudgingly accepted by the Safety Director). Overnight, percent safe scores climbed from 25% to nearly 100% and these percentages were maintained for 6 months. To celebrate, the company closed down the site one afternoon, served food and drinks, and recruited an hourly employee to shave the Safety Director’s head. Morale was high.

The Steering Team continued to test (T) glove use for several months following the celebration. Although glove use dropped to approximately 75%, it was a vast improvement compared to the baseline data of 25%. Not surprisingly, the number of reported hand cuts/lacerations went down dramatically (approximately 85%) during this time. Overall, the DO IT process can be very useful in reducing injuries.

Management’s Role in Supporting BBS

Here are some key management behaviors to support the BBS process:

• Ensure the Steering Team has the necessary resources (time, money) to be effective.
• Discuss observation process metrics monthly.
• Communicate one-on-one with employees about BBS.
• Recognize individual and team accomplishments.
• Actively work with supervisors to support BBS.
• Don’t take power away from the Steering Team to manage the process.
• Show patience (don’t expect magic bullets).
Supervisor’s Role in Supporting BBS

Supervisor support for BBS is also extremely important to ensure long term process success. Here are some key supervisory behaviors to support the BBS process:

- Attend training.
- Discuss the process in safety meetings.
- Allow time for observations.
- Offer to be observed.
- Help use BBS data to remove barriers.
- Keep up-to-date on process information:
  - Number of observations per month
  - Percentage of employee participation
  - Percent safe scores
- Celebrate process successes.
- Praise employees for BBS participation.

Steering Team’s Role in Supporting BBS

The Steering Team creates and manages the BBS process. Here are some key Steering Team behaviors to support the BBS process:

- Regularly communicate with employees about the BBS process.
- Personally hand out observation cards to employees and request their participation in conducting observations.
- Conduct observations in pairs with employees to: a) increase their comfort level in observing others, and b) demonstrate how to conduct an observation.
• Use various channels such as safety training, newsletters, and bulletin boards to regularly update all employees on BBS progress.

• Solicit BBS input from employees through one-on-one communication, safety suggestion boxes, and safety meetings.

• Design home observation cards to encourage family involvement in safety.

• Send memos to supervisors encouraging them to discuss BBS with employees.

• Schedule or coordinate observations with employees (when appropriate).

• Post reminders throughout the facility encouraging employees to participate in BBS.

• Involve employees in designing BBS signs, posters, newsletters etc. to promote BBS.

• Affix highly visible BBS tags or stickers to equipment that has been fixed as a result of the observation process.

• Display names and photographs of Steering Team members throughout the facility, along with their contact information, for employees to get in touch with regarding BBS issues.

**Hourly Employees’ Role in Supporting BBS**

Hourly employees need to be actively involved in BBS efforts. Here are some key employee behaviors to support the BBS process:

• Be open minded about the process

• Observe coworkers using the behavioral card

• Provide effective praise and corrective feedback after observations

• Be willing to be observed by others

• Accept observation feedback well

• Provide constructive feedback about the process
• Volunteer to be on the Steering Team when positions open up

Benefits of BBS

Implementing and sustaining a successful BBS process is not easy. Employees may be initially skeptical that the process is truly anonymous and non-punitive. Steering team members may get discouraged when they run into employee cynicism. Also, they may have trouble keeping the process “evergreen” once the process is underway. Supervisors may allow production demands to supersede BBS. Managers, looking for immediate results, may take power away from the Steering Team in controlling the process.

Despite this, thousands of organizations have had great success using BBS to improve safety culture and reduce injuries. In general, BBS improves safety culture and reduces injuries. Here are other process benefits.

• Focuses employees' attention on safe and at-risk behaviors.
• Gives employees an excuse to provide safety feedback to coworkers.
• Increases the amount of praise for safe work practices.
• Fosters open communication between employees about safety.
• Improves the quality and quantity of safety communication.
• Serves as a constant reminder of workplace safety.
• Increases employee involvement for safety.
• Allows employees to learn from each other.

Improving Safety Communication with BBS
One of the main benefits of BBS is improved communication throughout the organization. Improving safety communication fosters a more positive and healthy organizational safety culture (Williams, 2003) and reduces the chances that employees will get hurt on the job.

With this in mind, we use a safety culture survey to assess employees' beliefs and attitudes regarding safety communication. This is part of a larger evaluation of the organizational safety culture, which measures management support for safety, peer support for safety, personal responsibility for safety, and overall safety management systems. One of the communication issues we address on the survey involves employees’ opinions about cautioning coworkers “when observing them perform at-risk behaviors.” Three items on the survey address this particular issue:

- Employees should caution coworkers when observing them perform at-risk behaviors.
- I am willing to caution coworkers when observing them perform at-risk behaviors.
- I do caution coworkers when observing them perform at-risk behaviors.

The first question assesses respondents' “values.” The second question addresses employees' “intentions.” The third question involves respondents' “behavior.”

From more than 125,000 surveys given over the last 15 years, approximately 90% of employees agree that you “should” give employees feedback when they are performing an at-risk behavior. Nearly 85% of respondents report that they are “willing” to give correcting feedback when a coworker is performing an at-risk behavior. Unfortunately, only about 60% of respondents say they actually “do” provide correcting feedback when a coworker is performing an at-risk behavior.
Clearly, there is a big difference between employees “values/intentions” and their actual “behavior” in terms of providing correcting feedback to others when they are performing at-risk behaviors. This is problematic when we consider that the vast majority of injuries are due, in part, to at-risk behaviors. It is alarming that people are reluctant to warn others when these at-risk behaviors are occurring.

During training classes we ask employees why there is such a gap between our values (i.e., you “should” caution others) and behaviors (i.e., you “do” caution others) regarding correcting feedback. Common responses include:

- If I give somebody feedback about a safety issue, they’re going to get angry. I don’t want to cause problems or get yelled at.
- It’s not my job to give peers feedback. I’m not a supervisor.
- I’ve never given peer feedback before.
- I don’t know enough about that job to give feedback.
- I don’t want to give feedback to someone who has more experience than I do.
- I’m not sure I can give appropriate feedback.

Through repeated administrations of our safety culture survey, organizations often find that the gap between “employees should caution coworkers” and “I do caution coworkers” is greatly diminished following BBS implementation. In other words, employees are much more likely to caution one another about risky behaviors when they are involved in a BBS process.
Also, companies demonstrate that peer-to-peer safety feedback is increasing by charting the number of behavior observation cards completed over time (i.e., more cards equals more conversations). In general, BBS is designed to increase the quantity and quality of safety communication as well as institutionalize peer-to-peer safety feedback as a normal, established way of doing business (with or without a card).

**The Need for Corrective Feedback**

In addition to the natural consequences like ease and comfort, external factors often further reinforce at-risk behavior. For instance, workers may feel management pressure to take safety short-cuts for production. Other factors like fatigue from overtime, problems with the job layout or equipment, and poor training may also contribute to risky behaviors being performed. Employees need corrective feedback from others to reduce their likelihood of injury.

The challenge with corrective feedback is delivering it in such a manner as to positively influence the person instead of making them angry or defensive. Clearly, this is easier said than done. Here are some considerations for providing effective corrective feedback:

- Give it one-on-one and right away.
- Focus on the safety behavior and don’t make it personal.
- Don’t lecture the person and ask questions to facilitate discussion.
- Show genuine concern for others’ feelings and well being.
- Work together to find better solutions.
• Thank the person for listening.

Here are some considerations for receiving corrective feedback effectively:

• Actively listen.
• Be objective, not defensive.
• Remain open and receptive.
• Accept feedback without resentment.
• Clarify the future desired behavior with the speaker.
• Express commitment to conduct the desired behavior in the future.
• Thank the person for providing feedback.

The Need for Praise

Beyond increasing corrective feedback, it is also important to consider the power of rewarding safety feedback to increase safe work practices (Williams, 2002). Praising people for safe work practices: a) increases the probability that these work practices will be performed safely in the future, and b) builds a more open and positive safety culture.

With this in mind, we sometimes ask training participants the following questions:

• If you do something risky, what is the likelihood that a coworker will warn you about it?
• If you do a given task completely safe, what is the likelihood that a coworker will praise or thank you?
Responses to the first question vary greatly but may average around 50-60%. However, responses to the second questions vary from laughter to (maybe) 5%. Simply put, positive safety feedback between employees rarely occurs in most organizations. Behavioral safety encourages employees to notice (via a behavioral safety card) and then praise others for working safely.

Overall, BBS training and implementation provides employees the skills and motivation to provide effective peer-to-peer feedback on a regular basis. This also allows companies to trend behavioral data to assess current strengths and weaknesses. Together, this one-on-one feedback and group data helps to optimize safety culture and reduce injuries.

**Increasing BBS Participation**

As previously mentioned, implementing and maintaining BBS is a challenge. One of the main obstacles is increasing employee participation in the process. Here are some guidelines for increasing BBS participation.

**Using Training to Educate and Promote BBS**

- Provide BBS training to all managers, supervisors and employees.
- Provide on-going BBS training for new hires (and contractors when appropriate).
- Provide regular BBS refresher training to all managers, supervisors and employees.
- Provide regular “mini” refresher training sessions to all managers, supervisors and employees (less than 30 minutes) reinforcing BBS process tenets such as: 1) Positive, 2) Anonymous, and 3) Employee Driven.
Data Analysis and Dissemination

- Regularly present BBS data to employees, supervisors and managers in safety meetings, newsletters, bulletin boards and other communication outlets.
- Present BBS data that reflects employees' comments, suggestions, and requested action items from the observation cards.
- Conduct DO ITs and ABC analyses based on the BBS data.
- Include a box for “Follow-up Action Required” on the observation card (if appropriate).
- Regularly advertise BBS successes such as: increased involvement, improved percent safe scores, equipment and facilities improvements, and (when appropriate) injury reduction numbers.
- Advertise BBS successes through various channels such as safety meetings, bulletin boards, and newsletters.

Rewards and Recognition for BBS

- Provide one-on-one positive feedback for employees who are actively involved in BBS.
- Send thank you cards to employees who frequently provide high quality observations.
- Provide group celebrations (e.g., pizza parties) for BBS achievements.
- Provide tokens of appreciation (e.g., BBS hard hat stickers) to employees who are actively involved in BBS.
- Provide surprise gifts (e.g., caps, shirts) to employees who are consistently involved in BBS.

Use Effective Communication Skills with BBS Observations

- Don’t interrupt the person.
- Maintain good eye contact.
• Ask open-ended questions to clarify meaning and facilitate discussion.
• Maintain an even vocal tone (especially if angry).
• Be an active, involved listener.

In Conclusion

Most organizations are seeking ways to increase employee engagement for safety. The current article addressed key issues to accomplish this goal, including the development of innovative programs for safety (e.g., wellness programs), mentoring, and Behavior-Based Safety (BBS). In particular, emphasis was placed on specific considerations for implementing and optimizing BBS. This included recommendations for following up on BBS data, improving corrective and rewarding safety feedback, increasing key groups’ (e.g., managers, employees) support for BBS, and optimizing BBS participation.
REFERENCES


