

Behavioural safety: a risky business?

Tim Marsh

Some years ago I chaired a conference that included a speaker who offered “advanced behavioural safety”. At the end of a bizarre presentation that suggested hot coal walking was the key to the safe mindset: “if you can do this you can do anything”. I challenged him from the chair pointing out that interesting though the talk was, nothing he said contradicted the often union-stated position that behavioural safety could be guilty of focusing too much on the person and not enough on the environmental causes of behaviour.

Tim Marsh is...

A slightly less surreal and rather more informed debate occurred at Expo2012 with Bud Hudspith of Unite, workforce involvement champion Nigel Bryson OBE, Jim McKerron of Enterprise and myself forming the panel. (This was very briefly reported in August’s issue of *The Ergonomist* with the misleading heading “Behavioural safety gets a drubbing”). As reported in August Nigel rather irascibly kicked off by quoting one of the world’s leading behavioural safety experts, Prof Dominic Cooper, as saying “99% of all behavioural safety processes fail because of lack of credibility” but it was quickly pointed out that the full quote is actually “99% of those that fail do so because of lack of management credibility ...” which really isn’t really the same thing at all.

Indeed the debate (summarised at <http://bit.ly/SecMZ1>) came to a consensus to such an extent that we had to apologise to the chair for the lack of crowd-pleasing insult throwing and arguing. What we agreed was that there is a large variety of methodologies labelled ‘behavioural’ and that ‘hot coal’ merchants who run short-term awareness-raising initiatives with a behavioural tag are often guilty as charged. However, on-going processes that are based on the principles of ‘Just Culture’ and workforce ownership and involvement are not.

More importantly we agreed that this debate should be widely discussed and that perhaps it’s actually time to stop using the expression ‘behaviour’. After all, when was the last time someone asked to “talk to you about your

behaviour” in a good way?

James Reason’s hugely influential ‘Just Culture’ model shows how unsafe acts can be distinguished into unintentional ‘errors’ and intentional ‘violations’. Errors can be caused by a combination of a lack of training or fatigue or task difficulty and/or physiology. Unsafe behaviour in these circumstances therefore is unavoidable and can never be blamed on the individual. Violations are much more interesting as they imply choice and volition. The first of three subsets is the individual violator who is assumed to have acted unsafely for a selfish or lazy reason. We’ll come back to this in a minute.

‘Optimising violations’ are those where the person involved genuinely thinks they are doing what the company wants. This would occur for example where a few corners are cut to get a job finished on time and everyone knows this but the feedback at the end of the week is simply “good job, well done”, pretty much guaranteeing that those corners are cut again the following week. If you want to be emotive about it you could call this grooming. The key event could be as simple as a supervisor’s tone of voice or body language, as studies show these cover 85% of the communication and the words spoken only 15%! Or it could be the killer “but” that causes the problem with the supervisor commenting “safely but by Friday” rather than “by Friday but safely” as we all know the important part of a sentence follows the ‘but’.

‘Situational violations’ are, as the name suggests, a version of the equivalence test: what would a reasonable person do in that situation? Imagine a driver on their fork lift truck driving test stopping next to the load then applying the handbrake before engaging the lift ... have you ever seen a driver do that in anger? If they did, what time would they go home in the evening? When you hear there’s a work-to-rule at the airport you’re about to fly out on holiday from, is your thought “oh, good, they’ll be extra efficient and quick”?

So, with all unintentional errors, optimising and situational violators all falling under

the environmental heading rather than the individual one, it's easy to see why the focus on behaviour needs to be largely about analysis and facilitation and not telling people to try harder and take more care. However, we still need to return to take a closer look at the 'individual' violator.

Individual violators may well behave unsafely because it makes them feel in control when they are normally on the rough end of the stick! But that's a whole paper on its own with 'psychological contract' and 'self-esteem' issues at its core. More simply, however, they may have undertaken the behaviour because it's custom and practice. Studies show that a new starter or contractor will hardly ever swim against the tide when the vast majority of experienced workers act a certain way. To follow the rules when hardly any one else does may mark you out as exceptionally strong-minded, but far more often it will be seen as a bit weird because "behaviour breeds behaviour".

So even with individual violations things quickly get confused and grey. Indeed, Sidney Dekker, in perhaps the best selling safety book of all time, *The Handbook of Human Error*, comments that "human error can never be the end of an investigation – always the start".

In the light of the above – what does good behavioural safety look like? I'd suggest that an organisation needs to be spending at least every £90 or £100 on analysis and facilitation and only £10 on awareness-raising. Ideally this awareness-raising will keep well away from the "try harder and take care" approach doomed to failure, for several reasons. First, because we all think this applies to someone else (for example, the famous study that showed 55% of Scottish drivers felt that they were better than average and 44% that they were average!).

Secondly, because even someone rested, healthy and stress-free can only concentrate for around 50 to 55 minutes an hour. If you have a large international workforce that's a lot of unavoidable vulnerability. This is best addressed by the principle that in the 55 minutes you're alert if you see some poor housekeeping you should tidy it up so that it's not there to fall over when you come back around the corner later in la-la-land.

It's said that by far the most effective awareness-raising is based on hard data and illustration. We can all agree that the more

shift handovers, risk assessments, audits undertaken poorly or permits signed blindly, the greater the risk. Any decent analysis behavioural safety process will be all over such issues like a rash!

Perhaps the most influential writer on safety at the moment is Prof Andrew Hopkins whose concept of a 'mindful' safety culture can arguably be summed up as knowing there is always bad news to be found and that the best companies go out and find it pro-actively before it finds them.

This fits with what I would argue is the entry level behavioural process – the on-going 'walk and talk' with supervisors and managers dedicating, say, a half hour a week to walking the floor to talk only about safety. I argue that the tone of the walk and talk is at the epicentre of the whole behavioural safety debate. Done as a fault-finding exercise it will breed irritation and indignation. Undertaken with the work of Reason and Hopkins and Dekker in mind, however, and it will lead to learning, empowerment and an enhanced culture of thinking and communicating generally.

I also feel that it's key to have genuine coaching, not policing style to these conversations. Nearly all behavioural processes suggest asking the question: "what's the worst that could happen?" Done with a genuine coaching hat on and with learning and debate in mind, this can be very powerful – done badly, it comes across as a little patronising.

It's widely accepted that a safety culture is simply a collection of behaviours, whether undertaken by shop floor, supervision or senior management. I'd argue that any world-class safety enhancement process must, by definition, have a behavioural element and that the debate about this is long over. With apologies to the excellent work of the Unions, I'd argue that it matters not who does it but how it's done.

The final word really should go to the fourth member of the Expo debate. When Enterprise's Jim McKerron was asked towards the end of the session for a view from industry, he said: "I'd keep well away from this 'Just Culture' if I were you! It's a nightmare really...", then after pausing for dramatic effect added: "because we thought we were doing well until we implemented a Just Culture based behavioural safety system ... then I had a very long list of things the workforce explained we could do better". ❖

