



How To Ensure Your Behavioural Safety Process is Effective

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'The behavioural approach' to health and safety is one of the biggest recent growth areas in the field of safety management. It is also one of the most innovative developments. There is now a considerable body of research that shows the effectiveness of this approach across a wide range of workplaces (Fellner et al 84, Komaki et al 78 & 82, Matilla et al 88 & 90, Rat et al 90 & 91 , Reber et al 83, Saari et al 89, Smith et al 78, Sulzer-Azaroff 78 & 94, Zohar 80).

The issue now is not whether a behavioural approach works, but rather, what are the key elements that make the process work better, faster and with higher quality results. Leading practitioners (e.g. Krause 97) have warned that as the behavioural approach gains wide-spread popularity there is a danger that the design of many initiatives will fall short of what is required to achieve success. The resulting failure will end in comments like " we tried a behavioural approach but it didn't work for us". This is exactly what happened with many 'Total Quality Management' system in the 1980's.

Therefore, in this briefing we will review the main concepts and methodologies that must underpin any effective behavioural process. If you unfamiliar with this approach the briefing provides a good introduction. If you are future down the road, the briefing will assist you to review systematically the design of your initiative.

Principle 1 - behaviours not attitudes

Traditionally, safety campaigns have attempted to change employees' attitudes - often through fear messages - with the assumption that a change in attitudes will lead to a change in behaviour. Unfortunately there are several problems with this assumption. First, attitudes are very difficult to measure accurately and the old management maxim of 'if you can't measure it, you can't manage it' applies. In order to ensure an attitude measure is accurate it must be validated against an objective criterion. For example, most individuals when asked claimed to prefer to read a broadsheet newspaper - but most papers sold are tabloids. How do you best discover which respondents are providing inaccurate attitudinal data? By following them to the newsagents and observing their actual buying behaviour. Measurement is more direct and accurate if focused on the behaviour itself.

Another problem is that attitudes are notoriously difficult to change. Ask any politician or advertising executive who spends millions trying to change opinions a few percentage points. Unfortunately, we don't always see these 'change' messages, we don't always understand them if we do - or if we do see and understand them we may rationalise, deny or distort the message so that it has little impact. Worse, even if we do take the message on board and do change our attitudes - studies have shown that a change in attitude frequently results in no change of behaviour if the environmental pressures are strong. Indeed it's a fundamental rule of human psychology that we nearly always underestimate the impact of the environment when determining the causes of a person's behaviour. (Festinger 57).

Principle 2 - there's always a reason

When someone takes a risk they will often have a 'good reason' for doing so. A key aspect of a behavioural approach to safety is to ask with an open mind why someone is behaving in the way they are. If you investigate you'll uncover a root cause that's responsible for any number of other unsafe acts. Critically this type of 'investigation' must be done in a 'blame free' environment. People must be able to contribute without fear of recrimination. This can be achieved in a number of ways, but commonly it involves reporting 'behaviours' on an anonymous basis and utilising front line employees to undertake the 'investigations'. People are far more likely to talk to and trust a colleague than a superior.

Principle 3 - it's the consequences that motivate us

Psychologists have long understood that it's the consequences, as opposed to the triggers, to a behaviour that primarily motivate our actions. (Some people call these the 'pay-offs'). For example, if the phone rings (the trigger) we answer it - right? Not necessarily. If a person has learnt that the phone is 'never' for them - but nearly always for their teenage child - they may well cease to answer it. Indeed, evidence shows that consequences, or pay-offs, that are soon, certain and positive are far more powerful than those that are delayed, uncertain and negative. If this wasn't the case then almost no one would smoke, no marriages would be wrecked by 'meaningless' sexual encounters and no one would lose their driving licence because they had just 'one more for the road'. So often, when criticising people for behaviour, there is a tendency to assume that we are logical thinkers with a long-term outlook. Unfortunately, most of us just aren't like this.

Traditionally, in the health and safety arena, there has been a working assumption that providing the triggers to safety behaviour is sufficient e.g. training, signs in the workplace, verbal instructions. Where practitioners have focused on consequences they nearly always concentrate on pay-offs that are very weak e.g. don't do that because you might be injured - this is a negative, uncertain and delayed.

Principle 4 - what gets measured gets done

A behavioural approach utilises the basic management principle of measurement to secure improvement. It begins by taking a baseline measure (where are we now?) and then samples on a regular basis (how are we improving?). Critically, objectives or targets are set (where do we want to be?) and the results of the measurements are fed back to all concerned. This is a cycle or never ending process that has proven very effective in improving safety related behaviour in a wide range of workplaces.

Principle 5 - it's driven by front line employees

Central to any behavioural approach is the active involvement of frontline employees. It is they who must collect the data from the workplace; set (or at least agree) targets, and assist in identifying improvements along with any obstacles to change. Without this involvement there is no frontline employee ownership of the process. Without the ownership there is no commitment to making the process work. Indeed, many leading behaviourists claim that this raised commitment through involvement is one of the crowning achievements of a successful behavioural process.

The main steps of a true behavioural approach

Krause 97 defines the basic methodology of a behavioural approach as:

- 1 identify and operationally define critical safety related behaviours
- 2 observe and gather data on the frequency of those behaviours
- 3 provide feedback on these behaviours to the frontline employees involved in order to gain continuous improvement.

For a behavioural approach to work, these elements must all be implemented. Simply getting people getting involved in a safety initiative is not enough. Conversely, implementing these

elements without the active participation of frontline employees is also likely to end in disappointment. It's also vital that the data gathered is accurate and that it is communicated back in ways that are suitable to your organisation and the people receiving it. Indeed the specifics of how this methodology is implemented will vary from one organisation to another depending on their culture and operational circumstances.

Conclusion

Behavioural safety initiatives are now widely popular. There is strong evidence to suggest that this approach can be very effective. However, like any new approach there is danger that some initiatives will fail because they do not take account fully of the core principles and methods upon which the process was originally developed. We have reviewed the fundamental principles and methodologies that must underpin any effective behavioural safety initiatives.

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