



The Practicalities of A Behavioural Approach

ARTICLE No 4

As Appeared in Training Solutions Issue 7.

In Issue 5 of Human Focus (November/December 1998), we outlined the main steps involved in a full behavioural safety intervention and examined the role that each step plays in the process. In this article, we take a closer look at some of the practical issues involved in implementing a behavioural approach to health and safety and give you some guidance on dealing with the potential problems that may arise.

To recap, the basic concept underpinning the behavioural safety process is that of a scientific measurement of continual improvement. Briefly, the process works as follows:

1. The organisation takes an 'overview' to determine its current position in terms of safety behaviour and identify possible opportunities for a behavioural intervention.
2. A steering committee (composed largely of front line employees) develops a 'behavioural measure' - a list of 30 or so key behaviours that the intervention will focus on and measure.
3. Baseline data is collected via direct workplace observations - behaviours are scored as either 'safe' or 'unsafe' to provide a percentage score.
4. This data is then fed back to the entire workforce in a session that involves participative goal-setting for improving the percentage of safe behaviours observed. This should be based on employees' views of what the level of safe behaviour should, or could, be.
5. Front line employees carry out workplace observations on a random sample basis.
6. Results are collated and fed back to the workforce on a regular basis, with the aim of getting the group to move towards the specific behavioural goal.
7. As targets are reached, new objectives are set so that improvement is ongoing.

This article will focus on the specific practicalities of behavioural measurement (step 2), data collection (steps 3 and 5), goal-setting (step 4), and feedback (step 6).

STEP 2 - BEHAVIOURAL MEASUREMENT

The items selected to form the focus of the behavioural intervention (i.e. the 'behavioural measure') should obviously reflect the most at risk behaviours for the particular workplace in question. However, there's more to this process than simply picking out the behaviours listed in a safe systems of work manual. The drafting of the behavioural measure must be the result of a process of genuine consultation (co-ordinated by the workforce steering committee). Employees need to feel that improving on these behaviours is both possible - and perceived as valid.

Acceptability of the Measure

Behavioural items that are unacceptable to the workforce are likely to be resented and ignored. Worse still, one or two items 'forced' unilaterally onto the list by management can colour employees' perceptions of the rest - regardless of their individual merits. Behavioural items should therefore be written by the workforce themselves - or at the very least, genuinely approved before being included in the final measure.

Quality of the Measure

Another potential problem arises where the measure and the accompanying support material are poorly drafted. If the observable behaviour in question is not clearly and accurately defined, then the quality of the data later collected will be correspondingly poor. If either the baseline data or the data gathered after the implementation of the programme are suspect, then you won't know if any improvement in scores reflects an actual improvement in on-site behaviour. Alternatively, you could miss a valuable opportunity for positive reinforcement if real improvements are taking place but are not being reflected in feedback charts. Either way, a poor quality behavioural measure makes the accurate plotting of trends impossible.

A good behavioural measure must state clearly and specifically the nature of the item in question. Where these cannot easily be defined in words (e.g. 'overalls should not be overly impregnated with oil waste'), illustrations (photographs, or even videos) should be used to define exactly what is meant. In areas such as housekeeping, site maps should show exactly where 'marks' will be given.

The measure should also include generic guidance for observers/markers, outlining exactly how items should be scored. In the interests of consistency, observers must, for example, know how long they should watch a particular activity for and how many 'marks' they should give. The following example illustrates the importance of establishing these rules:

STEPS 3 AND 5 - DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

'No Name, No Blame'

If workers are to behave naturally when being observed, it is vital that the organisation adopts a policy of 'no name, no blame'. In practical terms, this means that the score sheets filled in by observers must be untraceable to individual employees and that any efforts by management to 'investigate' the identity of an employee scored as being unsafe are either logistically impossible, or firmly rebuffed. An organisation may have a 'no blame' culture but that doesn't always stop management wanting to know who it is they're not blaming.

Number of Measures Taken

The laws of sampling demand that a suitable number of measures be taken if scores are to be statistically meaningful. It's also important that observers inject some unpredictability into the process by taking measures at 'random' times. This is harder than it sounds as operational requirements frequently 'push' observers towards certain convenient times. The problem is that if nearly all observations are taken straight after lunch on a Tuesday and Thursday, you're likely to end up with a site that is safer - but only straight after lunch on a Tuesday and Thursday. Ideally, observations should be frequent enough and unpredictable enough so that the workforce learns to ignore them.

Procedures for Data Handling

A lot of good quality data can be 'misaid' because observers hand it to someone else to be 'dropped off', leave it on someone's desk or entrust it to an unreliable in-house postal system. The result is that data is either permanently lost or is included in feedback figures weeks after the event. Neither situation is helpful for plotting trends.

A second problem occurs if the individual analysing the data is not particularly numerate. The way around both of these situations is to ensure that all completed score sheets are put directly into a dedicated box and that only a limited number of people (with the help of a spreadsheet) turn the raw scores into aggregated percentage

Accuracy and Consistency Checks

The longer an intervention goes on, the more likely it is that individuals will become idiosyncratic in their scoring and/or that 'pockets' of inconsistency will develop. It's therefore vital that a systematic monitoring programme is implemented that allows inconsistencies to be identified and the reasons for them understood. The information gleaned from this analysis should then be communicated to all observers. An example of the type of inconsistency that can occur amongst observers is given below:

Focusing on Conditions, Not Behaviours

Where an intervention has been running successfully for some time, the number of behavioural issues left to be addressed will decrease. At this stage, there may be a temptation for observers to shift their focus onto issues such as physical workplace conditions that are normally dealt with by supervisors and/or safety representatives. It's very important, however, that the two are kept separate. The observer's job is simply to take an accurate measurement of a behaviour (and to seek to understand why it occurred). If observers get into situations when they're 'chasing up' actions, they will be seen (and will feel) more like 'policemen'. Their role will become less positive, less proactive and considerably more stressful. Moreover, both the employees being observed and their managers may resent what they see as unwarranted interference.

STEP 4 - GOAL-SETTING

Opinion within the scientific community is divided on the benefits of goal-setting in occupational safety. Some commentators argue that it is the most significant motivational tool available (Locke et al 1981), while others suggest that, in practice, its actual impact falls significantly below the levels claimed for it (Marsh et al 1998). However, all agree that goal-setting sessions are very important - if only for their symbolic value. It is highly important that employees are fully briefed about the behavioural initiative, even if they do not take full 'ownership' of the goals, or even speak at the session. If nothing else, being given a genuine opportunity to contribute to a participative session removes the opportunity to make excuses for dismissing the initiative at a later stage.

However, a number of practical problems can occur with goal-setting. These include:

- A badly prepared observer/facilitator giving a weak presentation that simply leaves the audience confused.
- A poor location for the presentation. If the audience cannot see or hear properly, they are less likely to understand the message or to contribute to the session.
- A presentation that is brought to a close (possibly by a nervous facilitator) before employees are given every opportunity (and encouragement) to participate.
- 'Hi-jacking' of the presentation by boisterous employees who focus exclusively on past failings, grievances and concerns (whether safety, welfare, or productivity related). In this situation, any discussion of the way forward and goals for improvement is likely to prove impossible.
- Bad timing - if the presentation is held at a time that's inconvenient for the audience, they'll want to leave the room before the session even gets under way.

One of the key factors in overcoming these problems is management commitment. If adequate time and resources are provided for the presentation, it's far more likely to be successful. Ideally, management should also be present during the presentation and seen to be supportive of the points raised.

STEP 6 - FEEDBACK

Accurate feedback is a fundamental and essential part of the learning process (imagine trying to learn to speak without feedback, or improving your golf with no knowledge of where the ball went). Feedback has also been shown to be highly motivating - particularly when it's positive (Skinner, 1974). However, its effective use in occupational settings is minimal. Most people, when asked, complain that they receive very little feedback at all, and what little they do get is either negative or, at best, grudging.

The use of a feedback chart (or other mechanisms) to display the results of observations is therefore an important element in the success of the behavioural intervention. If employees see regular evidence of progress towards the specific goals, their motivation is far more likely to be maintained.

The Location of Feedback Charts

It is important to ensure that the feedback chart is in a place where all employees come across it on a daily basis. The approach of 'we'll put it up in X area and the workforce can pop in and have a look whenever they want' tends to prove naïve and effectively means that many employees will never see the chart - simply because they're likely to have more pressing concerns. Charts need to be large, colourful, easy to read and sited in a location that has to be passed by everyone everyday. This means that even those workers with little interest in the initiative will at least be reminded of it on a daily basis.

It's not known for certain how important the 'general awareness' factor is in determining the success of a behavioural intervention. However, a daily reminder that certain behaviours are being observed, that the intervention's success is an important management goal, and that you, as an individual at the very least did not formally object to the goals on the chart, is likely to have some effect on your subsequent behaviour.

Feedback - A Warning

A number of problems can occur with feedback in a general sense when implementing a behavioural safety programme. The most important thing to bear in mind is - what you reward and value is what you get. If management do not 'reward' observers for collecting data, but instead allow supervisors to punish them for taking time off work, they'll stop taking observations. Similarly, if good suggestions and ideas are not appreciated by management, or feedback as to their feasibility and/or some resulting action is not forthcoming, observers will soon tire of proffering them.

A specific problem may occur with feedback charts if the employee responsible for updating the chart is off work for some reason. A chart that isn't updated for several weeks is unlikely to be taken seriously. In this situation, efforts should be made to ensure that responsibility for the task is handed over promptly to another (equally competent) employee.

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