



Why Initial Attempts at Implementing Behavior Based Safety Fail

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Over the years I have worked with numerous companies that wanted to adopt a behavior based approach to their incident prevention efforts. These companies relied on a variety of different programs to introduce Behavior Based Safety (BBS) into their organizations. Despite the different programs they all had one thing in common, their initial attempts at taking a behavior based approach to safety failed. Having had considerable opportunity to analyze this situation I have developed a theory as to why many companies frequently fail in their initial attempts to adopt a behavioral based approach to their incident prevention efforts.

As a believer in the behavior based aspects of safety I was curious as to why these companies were initially unsuccessful in incorporating the principles of behavior based safety into their safety management process. After working with these companies I began analyzing the state of their corporate cultures at the time they initially chose to go down the BBS path, the maturity of their management systems, and the methodology they used in implementing the BBS program they had chosen. This analysis led to a few key conclusions. First and foremost the culture of the company was not ready for BBS principles to be incorporated into the process. Second, the management systems that formed the basis of their safety programs had not matured sufficiently and finally because the methodology chosen overtook the vision. It became the end in and of itself.

Efforts to implement behavior based approaches to safety are well intentioned. The desire to include behavior based principles in a safety management process is theoretically a reasonably accurate indication that an organization has a culture that values safety. What it does not indicate is; has the company's culture progressed far enough for each and every individual employee to fully understand the implications of the expectation to work safely to them as individuals. In the



companies that I looked at it was not clearly understood by individual employees that they had the ultimate responsibility for their personal safety and in fact were expected to take actions to protect themselves from harm. Although, the company had not successfully sent the message that it is ok, even expected, for employees to watch out for themselves they were asking them to watch out for their co-workers. Needless to say, watching what others are doing, talking to them about it, and coaching them on the right thing to do are unnatural acts when the culture hasn't made it adequately clear that it is ok to take care of one's self.

Related to this deficiency is a lack of routine one-on one conversations about safety. I have found that when a company leader is asked do you have conversations about safety on a regular basis at all levels of the company, they will say yes. While it is true that people at many levels of the company are talking about safety on a somewhat regular basis the answer is only partially correct. Unless a company has focused strongly on developing a true safety culture as one of the first steps in their journey to BBS what they are having is meetings not conversations. In order for employees to embrace the type of conversations that the peer to peer coaching, that is part and parcel of BBS, requires having one on one conversations about safety must be part of the daily routine within the organization. Meetings are not the same thing as one on one conversations where creating the type of organizational culture required for success with BBS is the objective. While we participate in meetings, as individuals we frequently perceive a meeting as a group focused event. They are not talking to me, they are talking to the group. Even worse is the all too frequent perception that the content of the meeting applies to the rest of the group but not to "me". Finally, there is that small segment of the group that never engages with the group at all. You know who I am talking about; the folks that clamor for the seats in the back of the room, fiddle with their smart phones, or sleep. Meetings are no substitute for conversations in building a culture that will permit success with BBS. In many pre-BBS organizations where one-on-one safety conversations are occurring the nature of those conversations is not fostering a climate conducive



to success with BBS. It is not enough to simply have conversations. The conversations that are occurring must be the right conversations. They need to be consistent with the message delivered by other modes of communication. Most importantly, they must be consistent with the example set by the organization's leadership.

It is clear that in order to succeed in the implementation of BBS it is vital for a company to have a culture that is conducive to the effort.

Along the continuum from initial roll-out to process maturity a significant amount of organizational energy and resources are expended. Often, companies will attempt to incorporate BBS principles into their safety process before the management systems, and work rules reach a level of maturity where they are just the way business is done and are pretty much on auto-pilot. Under these circumstances the BBS efforts are perceived as just another program, another demand on our time and resources, just another one of those things we can wait out rather than devote a credible effort to.

"Programitis" is a significant pitfall encountered while a company is working to incorporate BBS principles into its safety process. With all the hype that surrounds rolling a BBS implementation methodology out organizations often lose sight of one key point; BBS implementation methodologies are not business processes in and of themselves. They are tools designed to facilitate the incorporation of BBS principles into an organization's culture and safety management process. When organizations lose sight of this, the implementation process overshadows the vision and initial intent, establishment of a workplace where people make the right safety decisions and encourage and help their co-workers to do the same, and become the objective. Often the infrastructure around these facilitation tools grows rather than shrinks as the organization moves closer to achieving the desired culture change until the "program" collapses of its own weight.



With respect to an organization's safety management process the most important thing is to assess the process and management systems that form the framework for effective management of the process. Are the right management systems in place? Has the safety process achieved a level of maturity where it is just the way business is done? In other words, is it followed with the same rigor that the financial management, human resources management, and quality management processes are? If this critical foundation is in place, the organization may be ready to consider incorporating BBS principles and practices into its safety management process.

The first phase of implementation is designed to create the proper attitude in the organization's employees as individuals. It leads them to the understanding that it is ok and expected for them to take care of themselves. It establishes the expectation that they should strive to always make the right decisions with respect to safety no matter what level of the organization they are at. The second implementation phase is intended to reinforce the concepts introduced in the first phase. It also focuses on improving hazard recognition skills, raising expectations as to what constitutes acceptable conditions, and builds the confidence of the participants in their ability to take proactive action to control and eliminate hazards as they encounter them. The third and final phase is the key to sustaining the changes in attitudes and reduction in injuries brought about by the first two phases. Through the use of concepts associated with interpersonal interaction such as the concept of personal space it prepares the organization's members to begin working together to keep each other safe and raises their comfort level in doing this.

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