

## Old Dogs and New Tricks: Keep BBS from Rolling Over and Playing Dead

At a recent conference, the No. 1 problem reported by mature behavior-based safety (BBS) process teams was observer burnout. So, why do processes falter and why do observers burn out? The answer to both of these issues lies in the strategy for observations.

Most BBS teams were taught an observation strategy that simply blanketed observations evenly across the site. They quickly learned that there was a direct correlation between the number of observations and the impact on accident reduction. The goal of the process became to hit the target number of observations. As the process matured, it increasingly became more difficult to accomplish the goal.

Behavior-based safety (BBS) is past its prime. For many processes, the glory days happened in the first year or two and, since then, it has been an uphill battle to keep it going.

Additionally, hitting the same number of observations began to have a diminishing impact on accident rates. But, since the process was successful, it was continued.

Leaders of mature BBS processes who have revised this strategy for observations have recognized additional gains and have created a more resource-efficient, sustainable approach. The challenge is to modify the perceptual goal of BBS from the quantity of observations to the quality of observations.

### WHAT TRIGGERS AN OBSERVATION?

The answer to this question, at most sites with mature behavioral approaches, has more to do with process than results. When we ask, "Why do you perform observations?" we often hear answers like: "Because we have a numbers goal," "Because we have to" and "Because I'll get in trouble." The goal of a behavioral approach to safety should not be to simply accomplish observations. The goal should be to improve safety by providing simple strategies that easily can be internalized and by identifying influences on safe performance.

People do things for a reason. If you want to improve performance, you need to first identify what is influencing the current performance. Is it a perception, habit, obstacle or barrier? (See "Understanding Influences on Risks: A Four-Part Model," EHS Today, February 2010.)

If you can eliminate or mitigate the influencer on risk, you are enabling a sustainable behavioral change. Observations that do not gather insight into the reasons for risk are functioning solely as antecedents, activators or triggers that remind and refocus people on certain precautions. This is the most expensive activator you can use. What triggers an observation should be used in a strategic response to previous observations, not simply a numbers goal.



### A STRATEGY EMERGED

Four advanced observation strategies have been identified which have resulted in significant returns on little internal investment.

**Self-Observations** – This approach is ideal for isolated workers and where traditional observations are not an option. It also can be used to supplement traditional observations and further reinforce a change strategy. However, there are limitations to self-observations that must be considered.

Workers often are blind to their own habits, so self-observations need to be supplemented by outside observations, at least periodically. Also, reflection can be grossly inaccurate, so workers cannot simply ask themselves, "How did I do today?" Self-observations need a reminder mechanism that indicates when to start and stop, and this often requires some innovative thinking to design.

**Aimed Observations** – Many organizations analyzing their observation data identify visible trends in risk, such as time of day, day of week, task, weather,

etc. The observations can be aimed at these exposure targets, rather than blanketed. If insight into influences (asking why) is not collected during observation, the ability to address the risk exposure is limited.

**Blitz Observations** – Like aimed observations, a blitz is a focus on a target. But, rather than asking observers to aim individual observations at the target, blitzes send groups of observers to the targets to do multiple, simultaneous observations. Blitzes concentrate a lot of attention and can result in quick improvements.

**SWEEP Observations** – SWEEP is an acronym that stands for seeing without explaining to every person. SWEEP observations cannot be used alone to accomplish behavioral change since there is no feedback component. SWEEPs simply are an on-going way to aim other types of observations at the targets where they can do the most good. Some organizations

use SWEEPs to determine a more accurate percent-safe. Other types of observations give workers notice before the observation begins, which often results in an artificially high percent-safe. Caution: SWEEP observations only should be used when the culture and employees have developed a high level of trust in the BBS process.

### CAREFUL CONSIDERATIONS TO PROGRESS

Mature behavior-based safety processes often are doing the right things. Further improvement lies in doing those things a better way. This same principle will apply to how you choose to help your BBS team improve their process. Involve the steering team and the union, if applicable, in selecting the new strategies. (See “Unions and Behavior-Based Safety: The 7 Deadly Sins,” EHS TODAY, October 2009.)

Prior to implementing new pro-

cesses or changing existing ones, it is critical to discuss with the work force the purpose and details of the new observation strategy. Join the many other sites that have found that a different observation strategy can breathe new life and energy into an old BBS process.

**EHS**



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