

# BBS: Silver Bullet or Out-Dated Thinking?

Is behavior-based safety a silver bullet, or one of several tools in your toolbox?

**B**ehavior-based safety (BBS) has its disciples and its critics. It has been called the silver bullet of safety and it also has been labeled as yesterday's thinking. Based on the evidence, it is neither.

If it really was a silver bullet, the organizations using it would be accident-free. If it truly was old and dead, it would have been abandoned by previous users and would not be attracting new ones. So, if BBS is neither magic nor dead, what is it? The answer to this question depends heavily on how you use it.

Although virtually all things called BBS attempt to address safety-related behaviors, they address different behaviors in different ways. Some processes attempt to address many or all behaviors while others focus on a critical few. Some overlap with rules and procedures while others only address discretionary behaviors. Some attempt to stop at-risk behaviors while others attempt to encourage safe behaviors or precautions. Some are based on the old thinking of behaviorism while others have adopted methods from the more advanced behavioral sciences and other approaches to human behavior and culture.

All these have one commonality: if they replace other, more traditional safety efforts, they inevitably fail, and if they support and supplement other safety efforts, they often succeed. This suggests the true role of BBS not as a magical, silver bullet, but simply as another tool in the safety tool box. To see how best to use such a tool, it is helpful to assess the job at hand for which the tool is going to be used. This job is safety improvement.

## Improving Safety

So, how can safety be improved? The organization can improve safety and the workers within the organization also can improve safety.

The organization's role in safety improvement largely is conditional. Workplaces can be designed and engineered to be safe. They can be audited to find ongoing opportunities to make them even safer. Where conditional safety is not fully possible, other safety controls can be put in place.

The workers' role in safety almost is completely behavioral. Although they can make suggestions for



workplace improvements, they are not in control of them. What they are in greater control of is their own workplace behaviors.

While some of these behaviors are addressed in rules and procedures, many others are not. So, workers' roles in safety improvement are twofold: to be compliant with rules and procedures and also to go above and beyond compliance and find discretionary behaviors to positively impact safety. It is at this point BBS tends to work best and add the most value.

BBS processes that address this special niche in safety (discretionary worker behaviors) are the ones with lasting value. They tend to be the tool that does a part of the job no other tool can do as well. Such processes address an aspect of safety typically missed by more traditional approaches. However, this approach also can prove to be less valuable if it fails to follow some basic rules for success.

## Rules for Success

There are four rules or keys to success for BBS that are most critical:

**The right focus** – It is tricky to discover the behaviors most important to safety but not already obvious to the people most familiar with the job. A Pareto analysis of accident and near-miss data often is the key to discovering these behaviors. Workers tend to learn safety lessons one at a time but not necessarily remember which ones happened most often.

The right kind of analysis often can point out which behaviors have the greatest potential to improve safety and focus workers on them. Many BBS processes fail simply because they focus on



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the wrong behaviors and the behavioral change they accomplish does not impact accident rates and severity.

**Addressing influences** – This is where the old behaviorism gets in the way. Smart BBS realizes workers do what they do for a reason and simply confronting them is not the way to produce lasting change.

Effective BBS is a coaching, not a confrontational, approach. The most important thing a BBS observer can do when observing an unsafe behavior or the failure to take a targeted precaution is to find out why the worker does or does not do it. The advanced sciences addressing human behavior go beyond the old behaviorism thinking and seek to change or address the workplace influences on worker behavior.

**Listening to discover workplace realities** – In the most successful BBS processes, the observers do more listening than talking. They seek to understand the workplace influences that shape existing behavior and take this information back to the steering team.

The interaction between observer and worker is coaching, but it also is collabo-

ration. Every employee works in conjunction with his or her observer to accomplish making the checklist behaviors common practice by removing obstacles and barriers to safe performance. The overall experience of coaching observations changes perceptions and habits around the targeted behaviors and they become cultural norms.

**Measuring the KPIs of success** – Early BBS processes discovered lagging indicators respond to the number of observations performed. Many still consider the number of observations as the key metric to BBS. However, this thinking is akin to Hawthorne Effect: more effort and attention results in better performance. The problem is such results are not sustainable long-term. Many mature processes still perform the same number of observations with greatly diminished results.

The most excellent BBS processes have multiple KPIs measuring three levels of leading indicators: activities (observations, meetings, action plans, etc.), impact (changes in perceptions and focus) and behaviors (percent safe of targeted behav-

iors). The right activities create the right mindset, which creates the right behaviors, which create the desired results.

BBS will not solve all your safety problems or replace your other efforts. But, if done correctly, it can address one of the last barriers to safety excellence in a way that never will become obsolete. **EHS**

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