



## **SAFETY LEADERSHIP**

### **Safety and Performance Excellence: Criticizing BBS**

*Some critics of behavior-based safety remind me of the designer of the Titanic. They will go down with the ship before they make any design modifications.*

Terry L. Mathis | Dec 13, 2017

The earliest versions of behavioral safety processes still are around today with too few changes. Some processes that have changed missed a few critical issues in their design. There remain popular misconceptions and limited views of what behavior-

based safety (BBS) is and is not. Regardless of the current state of BBS, a discussion is needed on what BBS should and should not be.

It is not a complete safety process. When a site starts BBS, they should not stop what they already are doing in safety. BBS should be used to fill the gap between traditional safety and safety excellence. It is not a tool to address process safety and high-probability risks, although some try to use it that way. The critics who cite examples of fatalities at BBS sites fail to realize it was traditional safety, not BBS, that failed.

BBS should be used to address the low-probability risks that tend to get missed in rules and procedures, but continue to cause accidents despite traditional safety's best efforts. Attempting to address traditional safety issues with BBS not only is unrealistic, it also puts observers in potential conflicts of interest. If BBS is a coaching tool designed to strengthen safety culture, but observers also are charged with enforcing the rules that might lead to punishment, they may be viewed as safety cops rather than as friendly co-workers trying to build a safer culture.

It is not right for every site. Like almost any safety initiative, BBS only is useful during certain periods of progression toward safety excellence. Some sites are not yet ready and some already have progressed beyond the point at which BBS could help them move to the next level.

Some sites have accidents resulting largely from rule and procedural violations and others have accidents mostly caused by conditional or design issues. These sites likely will not benefit from BBS. A careful assessment should be performed to determine if remaining accidents can be behaviorally prevented and if site safety culture is ready to support and benefit from such an initiative.

It should not be a blame-the-worker process. Many confuse behaviorally-preventable accidents with behaviorally-caused accidents. Safety processes too often have focused on root cause rather than elegant solutions for prevention. The fact a worker can take a precaution to prevent an accident automatically does not infer

that had the worker not taken the precaution, he or she would have caused an accident. Defensive driving long has been accepted as a way for the innocent to protect themselves from the less careful. This thinking has not transferred to other safety issues with the same level of acceptance.

It should not ignore conditional or cultural influences on behavior. Early BBS processes were based on the ABC Analysis model of reinforcement. The model is okay, but application of it was limited to a worker giving feedback to another worker and assuming verbal feedback alone was enough to change workplace behaviors.

A number of recent studies and several business books have touted the idea that people do things for a reason and failing to address the influences on behavior can lead to failure to change that behavior. Many BBS approaches continue to prescribe a confrontational style of feedback in which workers challenge those they observe to change behaviors rather than discovering the influences on their current behaviors. Correcting this problem proved to be as simple as training observers to ask “why?” rather than attack their fellow workers. Doing so provided not only a better model for feedback, one that built stronger relationships and culture, but a source of data to understand conditional and other issues that influence workplace behaviors.

Software further aides assimilating this data into actionable insight into what is needed in the workplace to shape desired behavior. No more must we rely on feedback alone to change behavior, but we can develop – through observation data – a deep understanding of the influences on behavior such as conditions, design issues, location of tools and equipment and common practices. Changing influences is the best way to change behavior; not just for the person observed, but for every future worker who does that job in that workspace.

There is not just one way to do it. Many of the critics of BBS only have been exposed to one particular methodology and have not even considered alternatives. Almost all of the potential problems at a given site can be addressed by using another methodology to accomplish the same purpose. Every behavioral checklist should be specific to the site, as even similar sites in the same organization may (and usually

do) differ. There is no one right size steering team or committee, no perfect number of observers or observations, no one perfect software program to manage observation data and no perfect number of action plans coming from the data.

Every aspect of the process should be flexible and the entire range of options should be considered, then narrowed down to a specific plan. Even then, the plan should be flexible and adjustable as the process progresses and the site undergoes normal or abnormal changes. The best way to do BBS is not one specific way or another; the best way is the way that best fits the site. Yet, still many methods try to make the site fit their specific methodology. Doing so not only compromises effectiveness but significantly diminishes the site's ability to make the process sustainable.

Most BBS critics actually are criticizing their own specific methodology and singular paradigm. All safety is about conditions, behaviors and combinations of these and the issues that influence them. Ignoring a tool that can help address not only the behavioral side of safety but also identify conditions influencing them while also forming a stronger safety culture should not be abandoned because of misconceptions or flaws in one of many ways to apply it.

*Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations the world over. A respected strategist and thought leader in the industry, Mathis has authored five books, numerous articles and blogs. EHS Today named him one of the "50 People Who Most Influenced EHS" four consecutive times. Mathis can be reached at [info@proactsafety.com](mailto:info@proactsafety.com) or 800-395-1347.*

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