



SAFETY LEADERSHIP

Safety and Performance Excellence: Two-Dimensional Safety

If the proponents of behavior-based safety and human and organizational performance quit debating and started cooperating, the result would be a much more holistic approach to safety.

Terry L. Mathis | Aug 08, 2017

The American Society of Safety Engineers conference in Denver sponsored a debate of sorts between the proponents of behavior-based safety (BBS) and what has come to be called human and organizational performance (HOP). These were touted as

two different “philosophies” of workplace safety aimed at reducing workplace injuries and fatalities. The latter of these two was presented as a shift in thinking.

There are several problems with both ways of thinking that should be obvious to those in charge of safety at the site or organizational level.

The first problem is that neither of these represent an overall strategy for safety. Each approach focuses on one aspect of what is needed to create a safe workplace and ignores almost everything else. Neither really is a philosophy, but rather a program or process.

A true strategy is a value proposition that defines how to win. In the case of safety, it would define how to win the war against accidental injuries and fatalities. Both these approaches fail to define what true safety excellence looks like or what it takes to achieve it. Rather, both prescribe a series of steps to fail less.

For decades, safety metrics largely have been lagging indicators or failure metrics. Such measurements prompt organizations to work reactively to drive the metrics down or fail less. Success is defined as the lack of failure rather than a strategic achievement.

The second problem lies in the fact that every site (even within the same organization) has a unique culture. While both of these approaches have been successful at reducing accidents, the successes are less a function of methodology and more a function of fit. BBS stresses working on specific behaviors and HOP stresses working on organizational support factors. The approach that will work best for the specific site is the one that best addresses the site-specific safety challenges. The factor that can change this reality is the extent to which the process can be customized for the site.

BBS became so popular at one time that many practices with little to do with mainstream behavioral thinking were labeled as BBS. Academic experts and consultants proposed very specific methods for doing BBS. Because of this, many

people have a very limited or specific view of what BBS really is. Based on the most popular approaches, BBS has several main components:

- Selecting specific safety-related worker behaviors.
- Observing workers to see if they are doing these behaviors.
- Using various methods to encourage (positively reinforce) or discourage the behaviors.
- Using the observation data as a leading indicator to enhance safety.
- Some attempted to shape the safety culture through worker interaction, caring and ownership of the process.

Many of these approaches to change worker behaviors failed to realize and address the organizational influences on the behaviors and simply attempted to force a change at the individual worker level. This omission was one factor that led to the formation of HOP.

Human and organizational performance (HOP) proposes that workplace factors of various sorts impact worker behavior and the organization should align these factors to prompt the kind of safety performance it wants.

The spokesman for human and organizational excellence in this debate explained the difference, stating BBS sees the worker as the problem to be solved while HOP views the employee as the problem solver. Neither of these recognize the worker as the customer of safety efforts. The workers definitely are not the safety problem, but neither are they the problem solvers. If workers could solve their own safety problems, they already would have done so.

While HOP requests feedback from workers on what they need to be safe, it ignores the truism that people don't know what they don't know. It is the responsibility of the safety efforts to add value to the worker: increased skills, better risk awareness, strategies for handling risks, personal protective equipment, etc. Even if the worker doesn't know they need these things, the safety department should.

Safety constantly should try to predict and exceed the needs of the worker, not just meet the known demands. Steve Jobs said no one knew they needed a smart phone until he invented one. Henry Ford said if he had given people what they thought they wanted, it would have been a faster horse. It is not enough to just ask workers and rely on their perceived wants and needs.

In all fairness, the statement that BBS views the worker as the problem is inaccurate as well. Most BBS programs focus on behaviors and realize that behavior is influenced by much more than the individual. In this regard, the two “philosophies” tend to agree. The organization should manage influences on human behavior, not just ask workers to change.

In this sense, these two approaches are part of a greater whole. BBS produces a measurement of targeted behaviors and an excellent opportunity to better understand what influences behavior at the very touchpoint where it is happening. If BBS observers would quit confronting workers to change behavior and start asking “why” when desired behaviors are not occurring, the organization could better target the specific influences impacting worker behavior.

Without such information, human and organizational performance approaches are simply seeking generic actions to prompt performance. Without the “why” approach, BBS naively is thinking it can change behaviors without changing the influences on behavior that could be modified in a HOP program. If these two programs quit debating and start cooperating, the result would be a much more holistic approach.

Even so, addressing worker behavior and its organizational influences only impacts one element of safety excellence. The greatest potential value of either of these programs (or a combination of them) would be if they fit into an overarching safety strategy that defined success and the specific role these programs would contribute to that success.

Terry Mathis, founder and CEO of ProAct Safety, has served as a consultant and advisor for top organizations. A respected strategist and thought leader in the

industry, Mathis has authored four books and numerous articles and blogs and is known for his dynamic and engaging presentations. EHS Today has named him one of the “50 People Who Most Influenced EHS” four consecutive times. Mathis can be reached at info@proactsafety.com or 800-395-1347.

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