

Imitation Can Be Suicide

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No two cultures are identical and any approach that does not recognize the differences risks limiting success or creating abject failure.

I have been flooded the past few weeks with articles, webinars and workshops that claim to present all you need to know about behavior-based safety (BBS). My first thought is that 1,000-word articles, one-hour webinars or even one-day workshops are inadequate for such a subject. The commonality of all these is the authors and presenters generally are people who successfully have implemented a BBS process... ONCE!

As a BBS consultant for almost three decades, with well over 1,000 site implementations and many more training sessions for internal consultants, I firmly can avow that what works at one site does not necessarily work at another. Certainly, there are some common core components, but the details of how these components are put into practice is absolutely critical to success. It is not so much a choice among options as a fitting of the options to the site culture.

The limitation of most practitioners and consultants is they want to create success by imitating another success. It seems logical; what has worked in the past will work again in the future. The problem is successful implementations of BBS or any other process is not about the past and the future. It is about this culture and that culture. No two cultures are identical and any approach that does not recognize the differences risks limiting success or creating abject failure.

First let's look at the core components all or almost all BBS approaches have in common:

- **An implementer** – This most often is an external or internal consultant with some experience or credentials related to BBS.
- **A sponsor or facilitator** – This most often is either a senior site safety professional or a line manager.
- **A process leadership person or group** – This can be the facilitator, but more often is a team or committee.
- **A list of safety-related behaviors** – This list is the target of the observations and directs the focus of the observers.
- **An observation strategy** – This is a plan of how many observations to perform monthly and how to distribute them among the site population.
- **Some analysis or utilization of observation data** – Many, but not all, processes include some review or analysis of the data gathered by the observers.
- **Process metrics** – These are measurements of the process activities that indicate how well the effort is going.

Now, let's look at the options for how each of these core components can be turned into process activities and how to select options to fit the site culture:

The implementer – The choice between an outsider (external consultant) or an insider (internal consultant) should be a matter of whether the population respects process knowledge more than knowledge of the culture. At some sites, you aren't an expert if you are "just one of us." At others, unless you are "one of us," you don't really understand us and what we do.

The sponsor – Sponsorship of any process can determine success or failure. The individual's reputation with the workers, past history of successes or failures or simply the level of the sponsor in the organization greatly can impact implementation of the process.

The process leadership – Some processes have a single person as the leader. Since this approach has proven problematic when the leader leaves and also has failed to create the desired buy-in and ownership, most processes use a team or committee as leaders. The makeup of the team varies from all management and supervisors to all workers and all combinations in between. Site leadership style and employee turnover are among the most common deciding factors in selecting process leaders. The size of the team or committee also varies according to what is required to represent the range of jobs and simply maintaining critical mass in the face of turnover.

The behavior list – Targeting the right behaviors and the right number of behaviors absolutely is crucial to success. Changing the wrong behaviors will not prevent accidents. Working on too many at a time can keep behavioral change from happening or from being sustainable long term. Also, trying to stop unsafe behaviors is more problematic than trying to start safe behaviors.

The observation strategy – The goal of observations is to give feedback that can change behaviors and, sometimes, to gather data on behavioral change. The number of observations and the distribution of observations among the population will determine the level of success. The nature of the interaction between observer and worker also will impact the amount and rate of behavioral change. Confrontation between observers and workers often results in reaction and resistance rather than cooperation and a coaching transformation. The observation strategy is where the BBS process either gets traction or begins to spin its wheels.

Analysis and utilization of observation data – The use of observation data ranges from counting the number of observations performed to sophisticated analysis of workplace and cultural factors influencing the targeted behaviors. Although some argue it is the interchange between observer and worker that most impacts behavioral change, ignoring this data seems to demoralize observers and hurt the effectiveness of observer interactions. Also, good, actionable data should not be ignored when the organization already has paid to gather it.

Process metrics – I already mentioned some people count the number of observations performed. Some also calculate this number as a percentage of a targeted number of observations. The correlation between the number of observations and accident recordable rate reductions has been established at a number of sites, especially in the early months of a new BBS process. However, in later months and years, the number of observations becomes much less important than using the data from the observations. Many measure participation of leaders and observers as an indicator of support for the process as well.

Although these issues may seem simple and straightforward, the devil is in the details and the possibility of failure quickly increases when you simply copy a process from another site. Carefully consider the potential consequences of jumping into something as complex as BBS with simplistic thinking and limited experience.

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