



# What influences risky behavior?

**D**o you focus more on the behavior or the influences upon it? There are four main influences on risky behavior: perceptions, habits, obstacles and barriers. How effective are you at identifying and responding to these influences?

People do things for a reason. If you don't identify and address the reason, you likely won't change behavior long term. Some people make a conscious decision to take risks because they do not accurately perceive or calculate the degree of risks. When expressing concern to this individual, they will likely respond with, "What's wrong with it?" or "I've done it this way and never gotten hurt. I don't think it's a big deal." This means a conscious decision is being made. It is easy for this belief to develop due to how most organizations incorrectly measure excellence in safety and the beliefs that are created as a result.

When safety excellence is defined as zero injuries, it sends the message safety means not getting hurt. Individuals will then often develop the perception anything that doesn't get them hurt must be

safe. What messages or definitions in your organization contribute to creating the wrong perceptions?

Organizations employ adults. Thus, they hire people with existing habits. During onboarding, information is provided to attempt to develop new habits with employees. Habits are behavioral routines that mostly occur unconsciously or involuntarily. This is apparent when an individual replies to a concern with, "I don't know. That's the way I've always done it" or "I didn't think about it."

For perceptions to change there must be a change in information and/or experiences. You can't force an epiphany to occur. To change existing habits or create new ones, there must be a change in what prompts it and/or the consequences (positive or negative, timeliness and probability) that follow. In your organization, what needs to change? Should perceptions about risks or worker habits change? Are there other influences?

Even in the best performing organizations, there are occasional obstacles and barriers that can make the job difficult or

impossible to perform in a risk-free manner. One important behavior to prevent incidents is to always select and use the proper tool or PPE for the job. What if the tool is inconveniently located, locked up, broken or simply unavailable?

After focusing safety improvement efforts to understand influences on behavior, rather than attempting to change the behavior with discipline or direct frontal assault, organizations will often realize they have a procedure, policy or organizational system that creates confusion or prompts the wrong behaviors.

One client realized proper glove usage was the key to preventing 30 percent of its employees' injuries. Once the client investigated why people wouldn't wear the proper gloves, several issues emerged. Employees were issued a certain number of gloves and, if they ran out, they had to justify to the supervisor why they needed more. That was not a comfortable process. Additionally, they found there were procurement issues several times throughout the year where they simply ran out! Within this single company,

there were several influences all impacting one specific behavior, best solved different ways. These experiences, when allowed to continue, created certain undesirable perceptions and habits.

Perceptions and habits will not easily change when the obstacles and barriers are still in place and provide strong influence on behavior. If we understand what is influencing behavior, we can address the influence and change the behavior. If we ignore influences and only focus on the behavior or individual, we might indeed change behavior, but it likely won't result in the behaviors you want.


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