



Avoiding the 10 common pitfalls of behavior-based safety

Behavior-based safety (BBS) is an effective, situational appropriate tool for addressing a certain type of safety behavior. When the limitations of control, systems and conditional efforts have been reached, BBS can provide substantial value. Recognizing how this tool complements existing processes is just as important as recognizing what often leads to failures in both early and mature processes.

Based on experiences implementing hundreds of customized approaches globally and improving just as many existing processes, the 10 common pitfalls to avoid are:

1. *Forcing involvement or implementation:* If someone is forced to be involved, it will be visible to others and negative experiences will envelop the process. Moreover, if the organization is not ready (immature safety management system and culture or other logistical or operational reasons exist), a successful outcome will be rare. False starts almost always create barriers to future attempts.

2. *BBS is utilized to catch unsafe or at-risk acts:* This tool should be used to

provide an opportunity to perform tasks safely, then coach individuals on what was observed and insight gathered into the decisions made. If this is a gotcha approach, individuals involved will be perceived as safety cops, rarely a warmly viewed organizational asset.

3. *Using the information to discipline:* If information is used to place blame, find fault, check rules or policy violators, rather than focus on voluntary/discretionary precautions, people will resist the process and your efforts will become pointless.

4. *Exclusive focus on behavior:* People do things for a reason. The process needs to prioritize and respond to the reasons for and influences on risk. Behaviors are a lens into operational reality and decisions, not the stopping point.

5. *Lack of prioritized action plans:* Action plans need to be developed that prioritize both how to maximize the effectiveness of the process (quantity, quality and focus) and its impact on safety (addressing reasons for risk). If this doesn't occur, people will ultimately lose

confidence and interest in the process.

6. *Low knowledge of successes:* If individuals, when polled, are unable to recall from memory two or three recent successes resulting from the process, it will become viewed as ineffective or forgotten about. Who wants to participate in a poorly perceived safety initiative?

7. *Expertize and modification capabilities are externalized:* Relying exclusively on a consultant or an external party for maintaining or improving the process and tools is an antecedent to eventual process failure. As practical as possible, work to internalize the capability to make necessary changes to the methodology, checklists, training material and software.

8. *Falling in love with the methodology:* Any methodology should eventually evolve to continue achieving new results. Focus on the results of the process and the value it provides, not the activities. If BBS is not getting the desired results, it may be the outdated or awkward-fit methodology you are using.

9. *Unrealistic expectations:* BBS is a tool for the ever-growing safety toolbox.

Some processes achieve great results in the first year. Others take longer depending on the maturity, logistics, support levels, culture and opportunities of each implementation. A well-managed BBS readiness or safety culture assessment should be able to outline specific and realistic expectations.

10. *BBS is viewed as the strategy:* BBS needs to fit within a comprehensive strategy that provides direction in the prioritization of initiatives to proactively address both injury prevention and the creation of a culture of safety excellence. BBS can be a very powerful tool, but it is just that — a tool. Ensure it complements a strategy of safety excellence, rather than becoming it.

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