



Understanding the Roles of Behavior in Safety

How fast you go about evolving desirable safety culture behaviors is the difference in control and influence.

Behaviors have always had a role in safety dating back to prehistoric times, and they always will. Behaviors were the primary, and sometimes only, tools for survival, remaining today as the last tool when all else fails. When in an environment you do not control or when you lack the right tools or systems fail, it is up to you to behave in a manner for self-preservation. This is popularized with the common statement, “You are the one responsible for your safety.” This is not ideal; it is, however, reality.

Most of the modern world now places a priority first on conditional safety, with government regulation focusing on leadership’s providing a safe working environment. Investment in conditional safety eventually reaches a point of diminished return, and when this occurs, these leaders turn to behaviors as another tool available in safety. How leaders view the role of behaviors and what tools they determine to use will affect/influence the results recognized.

Controlling vs. Influencing Behavior

Some behaviors in safety must be controlled and are part of leadership’s responsibility to maintain compliance; some, however, only can be influenced. The tools to successfully manage, control, and influence should not overlap. Unfortunately, they occasionally do, creating much controversy, fear, and resistance from organized labor.

Safety behaviors fall into two different and important categories: injury/incident prevention behaviors and desirable safety culture behaviors. Within each of these categories, there are two types of behaviors: mandatory and discretionary (Figure 1). It is vital to acknowledge this and ensure the tools are focused appropriately.

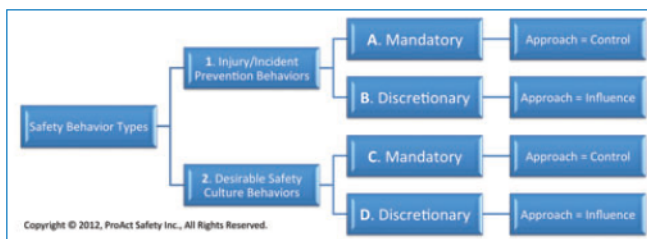


Figure 1. The types of safety behaviors

1. Injury Prevention Behaviors. There are, first, mandatory injury prevention behaviors expected of individuals, which are generally recognized as life-saving. In mature safety systems, these mandatory behaviors are covered by rules, policies, procedures, personal protective equipment, etc. Consistently enforcing these types of behaviors and controlling deviation are primarily the responsibility of leadership. Not doing so will result in disciplinary steps by many companies and government agencies. When individuals say, “Safety is a condition of employment,” these are the behaviors they are referring to and believe should be controlled.

Second, there are discretionary injury prevention behaviors

that generally go beyond what is considered compliance. Keeping your eyes focused on the direction of your travel and your body parts out of the path of potential moving energy are, for the most part, considered discretionary. It would be difficult to enforce these behaviors as rules. Desires to focus on these types of behaviors created the many behavior-based safety (BBS) approaches. BBS, most often an employee-led approach, can be a great, situationally appropriate tool. It is a tool designed to only focus on one of the four types of behaviors in safety: discretionary injury prevention. Significant problems arise when BBS is directed at other behaviors, especially mandatory ones. BBS is a tool of influence, not another opportunity to control behavior mandatory to remain employed.

2. Desirable Safety Culture Behaviors. All groups of individuals working together over an extended period of time create shared beliefs and eventually align behaviors specific to safety within their culture. Safety cultures are nothing new; they have always been a part of an organization. And yes, you already have one — but is it the one you want providing differentiation and a competitive advantage in your company and industry?

When an organization determines the elements, characteristics, and capabilities of its desirable safety culture, the remaining two types of safety behaviors become increasingly visible. Individuals helping to achieve the ideal culture will observe mandatory behaviors required of the safety culture (injury reporting, attend safety meetings, stopping the job for a safety concern, etc.) and discretionary cultural behaviors that exceed what is expected within the group (volunteer, identify improvement opportunities, mentor a new employee, etc.). The list of the cultural behaviors will differ for each group, depending on maturity and the degree safety plays within organizational values and priorities.

Evolution

Those responsible for safety performance and culture must recognize a clear distinction in mandatory and discretionary behaviors and the roles they play in injury prevention and culture. Tools to control behavior should be used differently than tools used to influence. Certainly control is a type of influence, but what occurs when the controller is not around is the true test of its effectiveness.

There are behaviors we expect in injury prevention and culture that should be consistently enforced. However, every culture will mature, and the desirable behaviors will evolve. How fast you go about evolving them is the difference in control and influence. **OKS**

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