Unsafe, at-risk, safe behaviors: Know the difference

The term “behavior” often has a negative connotation because of how it is used in discussions focused on performance and results. Imagine your significant other stating, “I want to talk to you about your behavior last night.” You wouldn’t anticipate a positive conversation. Behavior simply means an observable act. It is demonstrated in the words you use and how you use them, your body language (such as facial and hand expressions) and work products.

When it comes to incident- and injury-prevention efforts and the role behaviors play, there are two desirable types of behaviors: those that are mandatory and those that are discretionary. Rules, policies and procedures are tools designed to address and control mandatory behaviors. Other tools like behavior-based safety are put in place to address and influence discretionary injury-prevention behaviors. Controlling and influencing tools should not overlap, as the value they contribute is different and mixing them creates compliance and cultural problems.

Further, there are observable behaviors that prompt others to express concern, intervene or provide positive feedback. These behaviors fall into three categories: unsafe behaviors, at-risk behaviors and safe behaviors.

Unsafe behaviors — These are dangerous acts that often result in injuries and can be identified with common sense and experience. When actions are highly probable to result in a negative outcome (i.e., injury) with high severity potential, we view these as unsafe. Think of driving at a high rate of speed while taking your eyes off the road for 30 seconds. It would be hard to argue the likelihood is extremely high this behavior will result in an injury. This behavior should be stopped.

At-risk behaviors — These are behaviors with a low probability of injury that most often do not result in injury but occasionally do or at least have the potential to. These behaviors are a problem for individuals and organizations because they are difficult to detect with common sense and experience without more data and sophisticated tools to analyze the data. Think of driving at a low rate of speed while thinking of something else and changing the radio station in your vehicle. While this risk is taken every day by countless drivers, few are involved in collisions. This behavior should be coached.

Safe behaviors — These are acts with little or no danger, almost never resulting in injury. The known risks are controlled, and everyone observing the action would agree. Think of driving with your hands kept on the steering wheel, eyes focused on the road and constantly scanning for changes in the environment, with your attention focused exclusively on the task at hand. This behavior should be positively reinforced.

The higher the probability of a negative consequence, the more easily people recognize the risks. When risk potential reduces, we tend to overlook or fail to recognize the risk associated with the task and continue to behave in an unsafe or risky way. Sometimes we don’t realize we are not performing a task in the safest manner until someone points it out to us.

Rules should be established and consistently enforced with a balance of consequences to prevent or stop unsafe behaviors. At-risk behaviors should be addressed by coaching, changing perceptions, overcoming the influences that encourage risky behavior and creating new habits. Safe behaviors should be positively reinforced immediately and as many times as possible to perpetuate new or existing safe habits. Terms and tools used to improve safety performance either create alignment and buy-in or create confusion and resistance to change. How do you use the term “behavior,” and what tools do you use to improve them?

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