In Defense of BBS: 10 Best Practices for Improving Safety Performance

By Judy Agnew, Ph.D.

Behavior-Based Safety (BBS) is under attack yet again. When BBS first became popular over 25 years ago, critics argued it was a blame-the-worker process that focused exclusively on frontline behavior and ignored hazard remediation. (For a discussion and refutation of these critiques see Agnew and Ashworth, "BBS: Setting the Record Straight.") More recently, BBS has been criticized by those promoting Human and Organizational Performance (HOP) who say that BBS fails to take a systems view

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in understanding safe and at-risk behavior. (For a discussion and refutation of these critiques see Agnew "Is HOP a new Approach to Safety?") Now, even some of those who are in the business of BBS have redesigned their approaches to minimize the behavioral components. Given this history, an outsider might conclude that behavior is no longer important in safety. But nothing could be further from the truth! Behavior is at the heart of safety: following procedures is behavior, remediating hazards is behavior, designing safety systems is behavior, and making strategic decisions that impact safety is behavior. Clearly, safety is very much about behavior.

In its long history, BBS has helped countless organizations strengthen critical safe behaviors, identify and eliminate hazards, better engage frontline employees in safety, reduce injuries, and improve safety culture. There can be no doubt that BBS has contributed to the dramatic improvement in safety over the past 25 years.

Is BBS perfect? No. Is BBS alone the reason for the significant improvement in safety performance over 25 years? No. Would the BBS of 25 years ago be as effective in today's workplaces? Probably not. Much has changed both in terms of how organizations get work done, and in the practice of safety. A successful BBS process must evolve with those changes as well as incorporate the lessons learned from BBS's 25-year history. Rather than continue to criticize BBS and suggest that it has reached the end of its usefulness, a more constructive approach is to re-examine what makes BBS optimally effective and how BBS can continue to be a valuable contributor to any safety management system.

BBS BEST PRACTICES

Below are some of the essential elements of BBS. While some have been a part of effective BBS processes since the beginning, others represent lessons learned, and still others are a response to changes in safety over time. Collectively they represent best practice that prove BBS is just as important today as it was 25 years ago and will ensure that your BBS process continues to contribute to safety success.

1. A FOUNDATION IN THE SCIENCE OF BEHAVIOR

Effective BBS processes are informed by the science of applied behavior analysis. Don't be distracted by the latest trends which often sound good, but don't necessarily work or aren't practical. If the goal is to change behavior and the process isn't based in the science of behavior, it isn't going to work. This is one of the reasons why some people have a bad impression of BBS; that is, they have experience with "BBS" systems that were only loosely based in science and thus were less than effective.

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2. CAREFUL BEHAVIOR SELECTION

BBS observations and feedback must be targeted at behaviors that have a significant impact on safety. Don't waste precious effort on behaviors that might seem important but don't significantly contribute to preventing incidents. Start with incident and near-miss data to identify critical behaviors, and also look at JSAs and other hazard/risk assessments. When possible use big data from your organization or industry to help decide what behaviors to focus on. These initial steps will likely point you toward behaviors that will reduce high-frequency, low-severity incidents. In addition, be sure to identify behaviors that will prevent serious injuries and fatalities, and include them in your observation process. These typically take more planning because the behaviors occur less frequently; however, such observations are extremely helpful in preventing serious incidents. Finally don't just focus on typical safe/at-risk behaviors like putting on PPE and following safety procedures. Other important behaviors such as doing thorough pre-task risk assessments can be turned into habits through a BBS process.
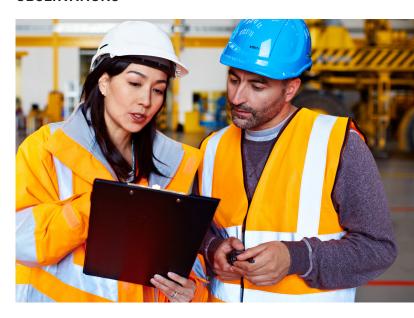
3. TARGETED CHECKLISTS

It is impossible to improve all critical behaviors at once. Long checklists of behaviors re-quire long observations which people rarely have time for. Furthermore, long checklists make it hard to see improvements since there are so many potential behaviors being addressed. By focusing on a few behaviors at a time it is easier for people to do observations. This will increase the frequency of observations. This in turn increases the frequency of feedback and reinforcement which ultimately changes behavior faster. When people see that their observations result in improved behavior, they are more likely to stick with it.

4. TRAINED AND KNOWLEDGEABLE OBSERVERS

The best observers are people who are trained in observations and feedback, and who do similar work to those being observed. This reduces resistance to being observed and improves the quality of the feedback discussion. It also makes doing more frequent observations possible. Conducting short, targeted observations on yourself and the people who work with and around you is something that most workers can easily build into their day.

5. HAZARD AND BEHAVIOR OBSERVATIONS

As people do behavioral observations, they naturally begin to notice more hazards. Including a place to record hazards on BBS checklists ensures they get reported, and often generates productive conversations about hazard remediation. It's also helpful to do training in hazard recognition, and that can be done formally and/or informally as people start discussing hazards more often. Of course, it is essential to have a process for timely remediation of hazards. This not only reduces risk, it also encourages continued reporting of hazards and helps people see that BBS isn't just about frontline at-risk behavior.

6. INCLUSION OF MANAGER AND SUPERVISOR BEHAVIOR

BBS is about everyone's behavior, not just the front line. Identifying critical leader behaviors at each level of management and including observation and feedback of those behaviors helps ensure that everyone is working in concert to improve safety per-

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formance. While the types of behaviors for leaders are different (including things like hazard remediation, coaching other leaders around safety management, and communication about safety) and the exact process is different, the principles are the same. It is all about changing behavior to improve safety.

7. ANALYSIS OF SYSTEMS' IMPACT ON SAFETY

Near misses, at-risk behavior, and incidents, should all be analyzed in order to better understand root causes. Very often organizational systems (e.g., incentive systems, training, communication, production and quality processes) play a key role in inadvertently encouraging at-risk behavior. The more organizations understand behavior scientifically the more they can detect system issues that influence behavior adversely, and correct them.

8. INTERNAL CHAMPION DEVELOPMENT

Sustainability requires champions who will keep the focus on the process, build in continuous improvement, and ensure the process is having the desired impact. Without someone (or a group of people) charged with keeping it going, it is all too easy to get distracted by new initiatives or just the day-to-day work.

9. ASKING MORE THAN TELLING

Feedback conversations after observations should be just that—conversations, not lectures. This is particularly true when leaders interact with the front line. The more we ask people about what they observe, the workflow, the pressures they feel, and the ease or difficulty of following safety rules and procedures, the more we learn about how to set people up to be more successful (and safe).

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10. MORE POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT

Today, most organizations have a better understanding of the power of positive reinforcement to not only strengthen safety behaviors and safety leadership behaviors, but also to help build an engaged, reporting culture. But knowing the power of reinforcement and using it effectively are not the same thing. Employees need accountability to use more positive feedback and reinforcement and they need opportunities to see the impact of their efforts and make adjustments when needed. Finding the right balance of consequences is challenging, but a good BBS process should help leaders and the front line find that balance.

Many good BBS processes have included some or all of these critical elements from the beginning. That is why there are so many people who are devotees of BBS and who understandably react to the negative attention it re-

ceives. Their experience and history with BBS is that it is an impactful component of a safety management system. Unfortunately, because of its popularity, there was a proliferation of BBS processes, and too many did not adhere to the critical elements outlined above. Because of this, some BBS programs were not effective, and in some cases they were damaging. While this is regrettable, I urge the safety community not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Anything, if misapplied, will not work as intended. A harness, if not used properly will not protect someone from a fall. We don't conclude that harnesses don't work anymore because some people don't use them properly. Improving safety culture and safety performance requires consistent safe behavior at the front line and consistent safety leadership behavior. The science of behavior teaches us how to get that consistency, and BBS provides a sound methodology for doing it.

[About the Author]

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As senior vice president of safety solutions, Judy spends her time helping clients create sustainable safety cultures. She also helps clients with strategy execution beyond safety, and general management and leadership improve- ment across cultural and generational differences. In her free time, Judy can be found on a pool deck, soccer pitch or volleyball court cheering for her two kids.

[About ADI]

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