

Risk Insights

Behavior-based Safety Explained

It's critical for safety to be at the forefront of any organization, regardless of size or industry. By upholding a safe work environment, organizations can minimize the risk of costly on-site accidents and employee injuries—boosting staff morale and maximizing productivity. Although there are several approaches to workplace safety that organizations can consider, behavior-based safety (BBS) is one of the most common. BBS refers to a proactive safety approach that originally debuted in the 1970s and was built upon American engineer William Edwards Deming's tenets of continuous improvement. This approach focuses on empowering employees to prioritize safe behaviors on the job using routine observations. Through such observations, employees will be able to better understand the consequences of unsafe behaviors and receive adequate reinforcement for desired behaviors—increasing their likelihood of committing to safe work practices over time and deterring possible accidents.

Adopting the BBS approach can benefit organizations in various ways, including promoting a solid safety culture and driving down overall occupational injury rates. This article provides more information on BBS, why it's valuable, ways for organizations to implement effective BBS programs and common mistakes to avoid.

Overview of BBS

The BBS approach centers around observing employees' behaviors and assessing what happens as a result of these behaviors. Such observations generally involve the use of the antecedents, behaviors and consequences model—also known as the ABC model. This model can help organizations pinpoint why unsafe behaviors are occurring on-site and determine effective intervention strategies. Here's a breakdown of the three main elements of the ABC model:

- ♦ **Antecedents**—This element refers to the factors leading up to an individual engaging in certain behaviors. These factors may motivate an individual to act in a particular way, essentially setting the stage for specific behaviors to occur. For example, perhaps an employee was told by their supervisor to hurry up and complete a task involving heavy machinery, thus prompting them to conduct the task without first putting on the required personal protective equipment (PPE). Furthermore, it's possible the employee may have performed this task in the past without wearing their PPE, causing them to falsely believe such equipment is unnecessary. In this case, both the supervisor's instructions and the employee's past experience serve as antecedents.
- ♦ **Behaviors**—This term refers to any observable actions that an individual partakes in, such as things they do or say. In the previously mentioned example, the employee performing the task involving heavy machinery without proper PPE would be deemed a behavior.
- ♦ **Consequences**—This term refers to what takes place after an individual engages in certain behaviors. Consequences can be divided into two categories: reinforcers and punishers. In general, reinforcers entail rewarding an individual for their behavior, whereas punishers involve calling on the individual to improve their actions. Consequences are considered the greatest influence on employees' behaviors, as they greatly impact whether these actions will happen again. Circling back to the prior example, the associated consequences could play out in multiple ways. After completing the task involving heavy machinery without the required PPE, the employee's supervisor may praise them for finishing the task quickly, therefore reinforcing the unsafe behavior and increasing the likelihood of it being repeated. Alternatively, the supervisor may observe that the employee isn't wearing PPE and make it clear that this equipment is essential, thus punishing the action and deterring the behavior from occurring in the future.

Why BBS Is Valuable

The BBS approach is valuable for several reasons. First, this approach requires observations across all levels of an organization, making everyone responsible for fostering a safe work environment rather than a single individual or group. As such, this approach often promotes collaboration, trust and teamwork throughout an organization, contributing to a stronger culture. In addition, the BBS approach encourages employees to always keep safety top of mind by thinking critically about the impact of their behaviors. As a result of frequent observations, this approach usually delivers long-term results by pushing employees to continuously improve and adopt a mindset that focuses on avoiding unsafe practices on the job. Altogether, this approach has the potential to help organizations keep accidents and related injuries to a minimum—a crucial feat in any workplace.

Implementing an Effective BBS Program

When implementing BBS programs, organizations need to take steps to ensure such programs are well-communicated to all employees—regardless of skill set, experience or department— and can be properly integrated with existing workplace safety initiatives and compliance efforts. Doing so will help avoid any confusion among employees regarding safety expectations on-site and maximize overall program engagement. Additionally, organizations should utilize the following components within their BBS programs:

- **Observations**—The most critical component of a BBS program is having sufficient observation protocols in place, as these will help determine the causes of unsafe behaviors on-site and identify ways to remedy these actions. Observations should never come as a surprise to employees; it's best for dedicated observation periods to be scheduled and announced in advance. This will help prevent employees from having negative feelings toward observations or perceiving them as a "trap." Further, the individuals in charge of conducting observations (also called observers) should always be trusted and respected employees that have been properly trained on how to perform objective safety reviews and are well-experienced in the tasks being observed. Above all, behaviors selected for observation must be those that:
 - Can be easily seen or heard
 - Will be interpreted the same way by others
 - Are within employees' control
 - Can be described in a positive light (e.g., focusing on what could have been done instead of what shouldn't be done)
- **Checklists**—To aid observers in their review processes, it can be beneficial to leverage detailed checklists. These checklists should be catered to the tasks at hand and outline key hazards and safety behaviors to keep in mind. For instance, a checklist for observing a commercial driver behind the wheel may include items such as wearing a seatbelt, using turn signals as needed and minimizing distractions.
- **Feedback**—Observers should be instructed to provide feedback both during and after observation. Specifically, it's best practice for observers to praise good behaviors as they happen, therefore encouraging employees to continue such actions. On the other hand, it's just as crucial for observers to call out bad behaviors on the spot and offer corrective strategies to help employees break unsafe habits. In the days following observation periods, observers should utilize their checklists and any other notes they may have taken to highlight employees' safety strengths and possible areas for improvement to the appropriate teams and departments, thus allowing for any further corrective measures to occur. In any case, even as employees are instructed to take corrective actions, they shouldn't be unnecessarily disciplined. Despite the use of the term "punisher" in the previously mentioned ABC model, actual punishments within a BBS program should always focus on fixing unsafe behaviors rather than reprimanding them.
- **Goals**—Finally, a BBS program should document goals the organization wants to accomplish. These goals will vary based on an organization's unique needs and specific safety exposures. Potential goals may entail setting deadlines for mitigating occupational injury rates by 25% or getting 100% of employees to wear necessary PPE. Such goals can even help dictate key behaviors to look for during observation periods.

Common Program Mistakes to Avoid

It's important to note that poor implementation of BBS programs can end up hampering organizations' safety efforts instead of helping them. With this in mind, organizations should aim to avoid these common mistakes when establishing their programs:

- Placing too much emphasis on observation processes and program participation instead of correcting unsafe behaviors
- Neglecting to provide positive reinforcement to employees who engage in safe behaviors
- Focusing observations and corrective strategies solely on certain groups of employees (e.g., hourly workers) rather than the entire workforce
- Putting all program responsibilities on specific employees and ultimately overwhelming them instead of spreading tasks across the workforce and giving all employees a dedicated (yet reasonable) role
- Failing to offer employee training on occupational hazards, necessary safety behaviors, corrective strategies for unsafe behaviors or the BBS approach as a whole
- Overcomplicating the program with excessive meetings, in-depth data reviews or lengthy observations (e.g., 30 minutes or more) that focus on too many behaviors at once

Conclusion

Overall, it's evident that the BBS approach can provide a wide range of benefits to organizations, helping them make safety a top priority and limit workplace accidents and injuries. By implementing effective BBS programs and avoiding common program mistakes, organizations can achieve long-term results and establish a lasting safety culture. For more risk management guidance, contact us today.

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