How to Get More People Involved in Behavior-Based Safety: Selling an Effective Process

E. Scott Geller

Abstract

Behavior-based safety (BBS) is an effective approach to preventing occupational injuries, and its healthful influence on work cultures is spreading worldwide. However, BBS only reaches its remarkable potential when everyone in an industrial complex understands BBS principles and practices BBS procedures. Unfortunately, many organizations that attempt to reap the benefits of BBS do not obtain or sustain comprehensive participation in BBS-related activities. This paper offers some reasons for resistance to BBS, and introduces ten practical strategies for getting more widespread acceptance of BBS and more large-scale involvement in the implementation of BBS procedures. Several strategies for encouraging participation in BBS actually reflect basic BBS principles, such as developing process-focused goals and metrics, and making behavior-based feedback a positive experience. Other suggestions are derived from social learning theory, including the promotion of self-efficacy, responseefficacy, and outcome-expectancy. It is hoped this paper will initiate further consideration and conversation about ways to enhance involvement in BBS and thereby reduce the occurrence of unintentional injuries, fatalities, and property-damage incidents.

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Behavior-based safety (BBS) has contributed significantly to the safety profession. Applications of the basic principles and procedures of BBS, defined in several sources (e.g., Geller, 2001d; Geller & Williams, 2001; Krause, Hidley, & Hodson, 1996; McSween, 1995; Sulzer-Azaroff, 1998), have dramatically benefited safety-related behavior when implemented correctly (e.g., see reviews in Geller, 2001d, and Petersen, 1989). Behavioral safety has also stimulated controversy, with some arguing that a behavioral focus puts excessive responsibility on the worker and gives managers an excuse to shirk their safety responsibilities (Frederick & Howe, 2001; Howe, 1998; Hoyle, 1998; Manuel, 1998), and others claiming BBS is too limiting and should be abandoned for a more holistic or culture-focused approach (Simon, 2001; Topf, 1998, 2001). Other safety professionals have recognized some utility in BBS, but have appealed for breakthroughs, including more efficiency, flexibility, and effectiveness with regard to producing long-term change (Kamp, 2001; Sarkus, 2001).

This is all good news for the safety profession. Behavioral safety has provided a platform for constructive debate, and the conflicting opinions have challenged the safety professional to learn more about the psychology of injury prevention. However, presentations of behavioral safety are often not optimal with regard to gaining acceptance of BBS principles and promoting participation with BBS procedures. Sometimes presentations of BBS actually provide ammunition for those advocating a contrary (e.g., more holistic or humanistic) approach. In other words, we are

occasionally our own worst enemy. This paper reviews ten basic strategies for encouraging more acceptance of BBS and more active involvement in applying BBS principles and procedures.

Although my next book (Geller, in press) provides many more ways to fuel participation than presented here, there is still much more to learn regarding the critical challenge of getting more employees actively involved in the BBS processes that are effective in preventing workplace injuries. Constructive communication among researchers, teachers, and consultants in behavioral safety would surely reveal practical ways to increase participation in BBS. This paper was written to prompt such a dialogue.

From the start, let's realize that employee participation is actually key to the wide-spread popularity and success of BBS. In other words, BBS has already done more to get line workers willingly involved in daily activities relevant to injury prevention than any other approach to occupational safety. It has provided principles employees can use to understand why at-risk behaviors occur and why some safe behaviors are not practiced on a regular basis. It has offered practical strategies for: (a) obtaining objective evidence of at-risk behaviors, (b) defining barriers to safe behavior, (c) teaching ways to substitute safe for at-risk work practices, (d) holding people accountable to improve their safety-related behaviors and help others do the same, and (e) demonstrating the effectiveness of specific BBS procedures and thereby justifying continued management support.

However, many organizations are not realizing these benefits of BBS. Why not? What can we do to increase people's positive awareness of BBS and their subsequent

participation? Let's start with the most basic strategy of all, and probably the most important – our language.

1. Watch Your Language

Words are magical in the way they affect the minds of those who use them...words have power to mold men's thinking, to canalize their feelings, to direct their willing and acting.

This introductory quote from Aldous Huxley's "Words and Their Meanings" (Hayakawa, 1978, p. 2) reflects the power of words to shape our feelings, expectancies, attitudes, and behaviors. People, in fact, acknowledge the influence of words on behavior when they say things like, "Say that enough times and you'll start to believe it," "Can I talk you into doing me a favor?", and "Do as I say, not as I do."

Safety professionals commonly use words like "accident," "mandate," "compliance," "regulation," "investigation," "occupant restraint," and "loss control." Such language certainly limits voluntary participation. Who wants to get involved in an "accident investigation" that seemingly attempts to find out who didn't "comply" with some safety "regulation" and therefore contributed to a "loss"? And who feels good about putting on an "occupant restraint" in order to comply with a corporate "mandate"?

What about a common word used to identify the BBS approach – "behavior modification"? This is obviously the wrong choice of words to use if you want acceptance and involvement from the folks who are to be "modified." Who wants to be "modified"? The term "behavior analysis" is much more appealing and more

accurate. Behavioral safety is an approach for *analyzing* what needs to be done to make safe behavior more probable and at-risk behavior less probable. Then, with BBS principles and procedures, line workers are *empowered* to help each other eliminate barriers to safe behavior and factors that motivate at-risk behavior.

In my keynote address for the Behavior Safety Now conference (Geller, 2001a), I used these words: "belief," "self-esteem," "self-efficacy," "self-persuasion," "actively caring," "empowerment," and "belonging." Afterwards, a graduate student conducting research in BBS told me she appreciated my use of such language but confessed the professors on her Ph.D. committee would never let her talk that way. Instead, she had to use terms like "establishing operations" and "rule-governed behavior."

My reaction: If you and your professors really believe these latter behavior analysis terms are more operational and less "cognitive" than the terms I used, then use them among yourselves. But please make appropriate mindful discriminations when talking outside of your academic circles. Use language people can relate to as human beings who think and feel, and who like to believe they have dignity, freedom, and personal control beyond the three-term contingency (see Bailey, 1991; Geller, 2001c; and Lindsley, 1991 for more discussion of this language issue).

2. Take Advantage of the Competence Motive

We often talk about safety participation as if it's altruistic or self-sacrificing.

Indeed, I've said many times that "actively caring for safety means going beyond the call of duty." This actually gives people an excuse for compromising safety. "This time I just didn't have time to follow all the safe operating procedures." Such an

excuse would be far less likely if the safe way of doing something was not considered beyond the call of duty but was the call of duty. Anything less is incompetent.

People want to be competent. That's the competence motive (Kaplan, 2000; White, 1959). In other words, we are motivated to learn, to discover, to explore possibilities, to understand what is going on, and to be in personal control of worthwhile outcomes. People want to participate competently in achieving worthwhile goals. Thus, if doing a job right means doing it safely, then disregarding any relevant safety process means the operator was incompetent.

How can competence be improved? Does practice make perfect? Of course not, practice increases fluency but without appropriate feedback, simply repeating a behavior cannot improve it. This is the perfect lead in to teaching and demonstrating a key process of BBS – observation and feedback. With BBS, competence-improving feedback is delivered in three basic ways: (a) through one-on-one coaching conversations, (b) through periodic performance appraisals that focus on behavior, and (c) through group data graphs that display a work team's level of safe vs. at-risk behavior, sometimes comparing one team's safety performance with that of another work group (Williams & Geller, 2000).

3. Make Feedback a Positive Experience

I've heard BBS consultants discuss feedback as if it's naturally accepted and used. They imply that involving employees in the development of a behavioral checklist and the posting of behavior-related numbers are all that's needed to put an effective

feedback process in place. It's as if people naturally look forward to receiving feedback about their performance.

How do you feel when someone asks, "Can I give you some feedback?" Do you really expect a positive experience? Most people do not expect to enjoy a feedback session. Based on a lifetime of experience, people more often link feedback with "reprimand" than "praise." So don't expect people to naturally accept and look forward to receiving behavioral feedback.

The context of a feedback conversation is crucial. More specifically, the nature of the conversation or group discussion surrounding a feedback session will determine whether such a process will be appreciated, supported, and sustained. Therefore, the first feedback session really needs to be positive and constructive. Realize that many people will not look forward to their initial feedback meeting because they expect to be corrected, perhaps even criticized. Thus, to get employees involved in this key component of BBS, it's critically important to teach managers, supervisors, and line workers how to make feedback a positive experience.

4. Distinguish SMART Goals from Purpose

The letters of SMART represent the essential components of an effective goal – Specific, Motivational, Attainable, Relevant, and Trackable. Goals for teams are SMARTS, with the added "S" referring to "Shared." Obviously, team members need to share the responsibility of reaching a team goal. Elsewhere I explain how to apply consensus-building exercises to get team buy-in and a shared commitment for a goal with SMARTS (Geller, 2001b).

Literally thousands of studies have demonstrated the power of SMART goals to improve performance at individual, group, organizational, and community levels. When goals are not SMART, they are ineffective. Thus, we set a poor example when we refer to goals that are not SMART. In safety this happens whenever we say "Zero injuries is our goal." This is not SMART; it misuses and abuses goal setting.

Teach employees (especially managers) to talk about zero injuries as a purpose or vision. The ultimate result of gaining and sustaining maximum employee involvement in BBS is an injury-free work culture. So our *purpose* for getting more people involved in BBS is to reach and maintain zero injuries. Participation is needed for various process activities that contribute to injury prevention and the attainment of our vision of injury free. These process activities can be defined in terms of a certain number of specific actions that need to occur in a given period of time in order to be "successful."

Thus, teach workers how to set SMART goals for *process* activities. These activities and their associated goals change continuously, but the vision of "zero injuries" remains the same. That's what Edwards Deming meant when he referred to "constancy of purpose" as the first of his famous 14 points for the transformation of American industry to improved quality, productivity, and lower costs (Deming, 1986).

5. Elevate Self-Efficacy and Response-Efficacy

SMART goals include these two critical belief states. Specifically, self-efficacy refers to one's belief that s/he can handle an assignment. Having response-efficacy means the person believes an assignment is useful in accomplishing a particular objective or purpose (Bandura, 1997). Thus, the "attainable" quality of a SMART goal

accounts for self-efficacy, while the "relevant" feature relates directly to responseefficacy.

These two belief states have applications and ramifications beyond goal setting. For example, both of these belief states need to be addressed and enhanced for training to be most effective and for scare tactics to motivate appropriate behavior change (Witte & Allen, 2000). Actually, whenever you want to persuade an individual or group to participate in a certain activity, you need to develop sufficient self- and response-efficacy.

How much efficacy is enough? Only the recipients of an assignment can answer this important question. So ask, "Do you believe you can do this" and "Do you believe this assignment is relevant to our mission statement?" A "no" to either of these questions requires the open-ended question, "What would it take to elevate your belief state?"

6. Sell Outcome-Expectancy with Personal Testimonies

A discussion of self- and response-efficacy connects logically with a consideration of outcome-expectancy. This is the "motivational" component of SMART goals. Specifically, outcome-expectancy means the participant believes the completion of a given activity or the attainment of a certain goal will result in worthwhile consequences. In other words, the performer believes the effect of participating will be worth the effort (cf. Bandura, 1997).

This could be the most difficult and important challenge in getting more involvement in BBS. You could convince potential participants they can accomplish a particular BBS process (self-efficacy) and that the process can prevent injuries

(response-efficacy), but they might still be unmotivated because the consequence of reducing injuries beyond an already low occurrence rate doesn't seem important enough to justify the extra time and inconvenience. After all, none of the potential participants have gotten seriously hurt without this new BBS process.

Increasing outcome-expectancy for safety activities requires your best sales pitch. How should you approach this? Often safety professionals use group statistics like total recordable injury rate (TRIR) or total compensation costs to motivate more participation. Do workers walk around on the job thinking about lowering the company's TRIR? Can people relate to this outcome number? Of course not – it's too abstract; it's too remote. The outcome they can relate to is an individual statistic – a personal report of an injured employee they know.

Research on risk perception has shown that people get more concerned or outraged about an issue when individual case studies are used in lieu of group statistics (Sandman, 1989, 1994; Slovic, 1991). That's the rationale behind politicians pointing to specific individuals in their audiences when attempting to gain support for a particular issue or plan of action.

Personal testimonies provide a powerful image. Listeners can relate to an individual's story and put themselves in the same situation. Two kinds of testimonies can motivate participation in a BBS process: (a) a personal account of an injury that could have been prevented by a certain BBS technique, and (b) an anecdote about someone who avoided an injury by using the particular BBS process.

Thus, the ultimate challenge is to get individuals to open up and speak frankly about their close calls and their actual injuries, including the specific behaviors that

contributed to these mishaps. And they need to own up to behaviors they could have done to prevent the incident. This will happen when employees participate in developing the BBS procedures, and believe those in charge of the process understand the principles behind BBS and are willing and able to support BBS. This leads to the next strategy for increasing participation in BBS.

7. Teach Theory and Principles Before Procedures

Many scholars have written about the need to have a guiding theory or set of principles to consult when designing and refining methods and procedures (e.g., Covey, 1991; Deming, 1993). In fact, by summarizing the right theory or principles into a mission statement, you have a standard for judging the value of your company's procedures, policies and performance expectations. You also have a rationale for specific procedures taught during training.

When it comes to safety, many companies start with teaching step-by-step procedures (referred to as "training"). They don't educate people first about the principles or rationale behind a particular safety policy, program or process. As a result many safety programs are referred to as "flavor of the month." Such hand-me-down programs usually attract less than desired involvement, and they don't last very long.

When people are educated about the principles and rationale behind a BBS process, they can customize specific procedures for their own work areas. Then the relevance of the training process is obvious, and participation is enhanced. People are more likely to accept and follow procedures they helped to develop. They see such safe operating procedures as "the best way to do it" rather than "a policy we must obey because management says so."

8. Use Process Measures of Safety Performance

Both the quantity and quality of participation in BBS activities depend on the numbers you use to evaluate success or failure. The bottom-line measure – total recordable injury rate (TRIR) – provides neither instructive guidance nor motivation to continue a particular safety process. It tells us nothing about why we're succeeding or failing (O'Brien, 2000). Yet companies are frequently ranked according to their OSHA recordables and lost-time injuries. And within organizations, individuals or work teams frequently earn a financial bonus according to outcomes. As per basic reinforcement principles of BBS, this motivates employees to cover-up their injuries and stifles the very kinds of communication needed to prevent injuries.

Instead, keep score on the various proactive things individuals and groups do for safety. For example, monitor the numbers of near hits, property damage incidents, and injuries reported. Track the number of corrective actions implemented and evaluated, the number of environmental and behavioral audits conducted, the number of environmental hazards eliminated, the number of safety suggestions and safety work orders submitted, and so on. Graph and post the percentage of individuals who participate in various safety-related activities, as well as the percentage of safe work environments and behaviors observed during systematic audits. Now you have an accountability system that can facilitate participation.

9. Look Beyond the Numbers

While process measures are obviously needed to hold people accountable for completing specific BBS procedures, Deming (1991, 1992) warned us not to get too hung up on numbers. When I teach managers a BBS process, I inevitably get the

question, "What's the ROI or return on investment?" Managers want to know how much the process will cost and how long it will take for the numbers (as in total recordable injures) to improve. This analytical approach to safety is obviously inspired by the popular management principle, "You can only manage what you can measure."

Managers focus on the numbers, but leaders look beyond the numbers. Leaders certainly appreciate the need to hold people accountable with numbers, but they also understand you can't measure everything. There are some things you do and ask others to do because you know it's the right thing to do. Leaders believe, for example, it's important to increase employees' self-esteem or awareness of individual importance, feelings of empowerment, and a sense of belonging or interdependency. Yet they don't attempt to measure their success at increasing these actively caring person states or establishing conditions (Michael, 1982). They do things on a regular basis to inspire these feeling states in others, but don't worry about measuring their direct impact on these intangibles. They have faith in the research-supported theory that promoting these person states is important (Geller, 2001d). In the same vein, people take vitamin pills regularly even though they don't notice any measurable effects.

As BBS consultants realize, genuine one-to-one recognition increases trust and feelings of importance; SMART goal setting builds feelings of empowerment; and group celebrations facilitate a sense of belonging. You need to perform and support these sorts of activities without expecting to see an immediate change in the numbers of a safety accountability system. Now and then it's a good idea to assess whether certain actions are influencing people's subjective feelings in a desired direction. This can be done informally through personal interviews, unaided by a score card.

10. Build and Maintain Momentum

It's quite fitting to end a paper on facilitating participation in BBS with a discussion of momentum. In fact, to a large extent, the principles and procedures of BBS naturally build and maintain momentum for occupational safety. Let's consider factors relevant to increasing momentum; their direct relevance to BBS will be obvious. I think you'll agree from personal experience that three factors are crucial: *achievement* of the participants, *atmosphere* of the culture, and *attitude* of the coaches and team leaders. These three interdependent ingredients of momentum start with the letter 'A,' and therefore are easy to remember.

Achievement of the Participants

It's obvious that success builds success. Good performance is more likely after a run of successful behaviors than failures. In sports, a succession of winning plays or points scored creates momentum. This means you've got to keep score. You need a system to track small wins in safety that can build momentum. At sporting events, fans constantly check the scoreboard to measure their team's performance. "Knowing the score" creates excitement if your team is performing well, or urgency if performance must improve. This kind of observable and equitable appraisal gives the team feedback. It improves subsequent performance and increases the probability of more success and continued momentum.

To manage safety successfully, you must find ongoing objective and impartial measures of performance that enable regular evaluation of progress, and motivate employees to participate in an achievement-oriented process. The principles and procedures of BBS embrace ways to make this happen, including:

- Develop up-stream process measures such as number of audits completed or percentage of safe behaviors occurring.
- Set process-oriented goals that are specific, motivational, achievable,
 relevant, trackable, and shared.
- Discuss safety performance in terms of accomplishment what people
 have done for safety, and what additional achievement potential is within
 their domain of control.
- Recognize individuals appropriately for their accomplishments.
- Celebrate group or team accomplishments on a regular basis.

Atmosphere of the Culture

In sports, it's called the "home field advantage." It means having fans available to help initiate or sustain momentum. By packing the stands and cheering loudly, fans create an atmosphere that can motivate the home team to try harder.

I hope the relevance to BBS is clear. The atmosphere surrounding BBS influences continuous participation in a BBS effort. Is the work culture optimistic about the new BBS initiative, or is the process viewed as another "flavor of the month?" Do the workers trust management to give adequate support to a long-term intervention, or is this just another "quick fix" reaction that will soon be replaced by another "priority"?

Before helping a work team implement a BBS process, my partners at Safety Performance Solutions insist everyone in the work culture learn the principles underlying the process. Everyone in the culture needs to learn the rationale behind the safety process, even those who will not be involved in actual implementation. This helps to provide the right kind of atmosphere or cultural context to support the process.

When the vision of a work team is shared optimistically with the entire work force, people are likely to buy-in and do what it takes to support the mission. When this happens, interpersonal trust and morale builds, along with a winning spirit. People don't fear failure but expect to succeed, and this atmosphere fuels more achievement from the process team.

Attitude of Leaders

The coach of an athletic team can make or break momentum. Coaches initiate and support momentum by helping both individuals and the team recognize their accomplishments. This starts with a clear statement of a vision and attainable goals. Then the leader enthusiastically holds individuals and the team accountable for achieving these goals.

A positive coach can even help members of a losing team feel better about themselves, and give momentum a chance. The key is to find pockets of excellence to acknowledge. This builds self-confidence and self-efficacy. Then specific corrective feedback will be accepted as key to being more successful, and to building more momentum. It does little good for safety leaders to reprimand individuals or teams for a poor safety record, unless they also provide a method people can use to perform better. And the leader must explain and support the improvement method with confidence, commitment, and enthusiasm.

For momentum to build and continue, support means more than providing necessary resources. It means looking for success stories to recognize and celebrate. This helps to develop feelings of achievement among those directly involved (the team) and an optimistic atmosphere from others (the work culture). These are the ingredients

for safety momentum. Keep these in place and your momentum will be sustained.

Then you can truly expect the best from your BBS process.

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