Behavior-Based Safety Leadership: Avoid Being Safe by Accident

By Judy L. Agnew, Ph.D.

One of the biggest challenges in safety is getting people to do what they are supposed to do. There are many resources for keeping you up-to-date on the latest regulations and state-of-the-art safety equipment. However, none of that matters if the people in your organization don't follow the regulations and/or don't use the equipment properly. From skipping steps in a confined space entry procedure to failing to wear PPE at the appropriate time to not drinking enough water to prevent heat stress, getting people

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to do the right thing is often a challenge. These challenges led to the development of Behavior-Based Safety (BBS) over twenty years ago.

BBS is a scientifically-based set of strategies designed to help front-line workers engage in safe behaviors more consistently. It involves observations (usually peer-to-peer), real-time feedback and recognition for improvement. When implemented properly, BBS can be very effective and has improved safety for thousands of organizations. But a BBS process that focuses too heavily or exclusively on the front line is not an optimal solution. While such focus appears to make sense since front-line employees are the ones in the line of fire, it is really only part of the solution. Leaders also need to change their behavior in order to maximize safety.

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There are some obvious behaviors that supervisors, managers and executives need to do to create and sustain excellence in safety. What leaders say about safety, how they prioritize safety both in words and actions, how quickly they deal with hazardous conditions, etc. are all straight-forward examples of leader behaviors that need to be done with quality and consistency. But there are also less obvious leader behaviors that impact safety.

Leaders are responsible for creating and maintaining organizational systems and processes. Organizational systems influence behavior just as much, sometimes more, than what leaders say and do directly with the workforce. Safety training programs, incentive systems, staffing levels, reward and recognition programs, promotion and hiring practices, supplier and contractor relationships, and quality programs all have potential impact on safety. Thus, leader behavior sets the context for front-line behavior both directly and indirectly. Yet, the impact of many organizational systems on safety is unknown and unplanned. Leaders often create these systems in order to achieve other important business objectives (e.g., improve quality, lower costs). Therefore, one critical, but not obvious leader behavior is to look at the impact of organizational systems on safety and ensure the systems don't inadvertently encourage at-risk behavior. For example, a Six Sigma project designed to save a million dollars unintentionally encouraged safety shortcuts and ultimately caused a multi-million dollar accident instead.

It is important to note here that the most effective approach for helping leaders increase high-impact safety behaviors is the same approach used in good BBS programs: the science of behavior analysis. While the tools and specific strategies might differ, only

approaches based on science will be effective in the long term. Behavioral science gives us the criteria to evaluate what we do in safety and guides us to safety solutions with maximum impact. Your organization uses the latest science and technology for all other parts of your business. Why would you not use science for the essential job of managing people and their behavior, especially around safety and safety leadership?

Once you understand how to improve behavior (the science tells us that), then the question is what safety leadership behaviors should you focus on? This is difficult because leaders' role in safety has been poorly defined. Vague phrases such as "making safety a priority" or "creating a safety culture" are not instructive. What should a leader do today and tomorrow to ensure a safe work environment?

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After interacting with thousands of supervisors, managers and executives, we have rarely met a leader who didn't care about safety. Lack of caring and concern about safety is not the problem. Leaders are adept at talking the talk: "Safety is the first priority," "Nothing is more important than safety," "Safety is a core value." Nevertheless, when we ask leaders about the activities they do each day regarding safety we often hear general phrases like "I make sure the employees know how important safety is" or "I emphasize safety all the time." When they do get more specific, we hear things like, "I remind them to wear their PPE" or "I talk about safety each day" or "I start every meeting with safety."

Two questions come to mind: (1) Are these the right behaviors for leaders to engage in? and (2) Is it enough? Many leaders have a nagging feeling the answer to both questions is no. Nevertheless, they aren't sure what more to do. How do you become an exemplary safety leader? What can a leader do to help create a culture that truly embraces safety? What are the steps to build a high-performance safety culture?

Good intentions are not enough. Effective safety leadership requires systematic assessment of the impact of current management actions and establishing what actions to continue, what actions to stop and what actions to start.

Consider the following when establishing what your leaders should continue, stop and start.

- Do the safety programs in your organization deliver the desired outcomes? Use data, not hear-say to make this determination. Many well intended safety programs sadly do not improve safety.

- Are the safety communication systems effective at disseminating information? Don't be lulled into thinking that company intranets and email are always read and understood.

- Do individual leaders effectively coach direct reports to improve safety? What is the ratio of positive to negative feedback that people receive around safety? Most organizations unintentionally have a ratio heavily skewed toward the negative. This builds resentment and negatively impacts employee engagement in safety efforts.

- Is discipline having the desired impact? Disciplinary action has a ripple effect that can last for years. Many safety issues can be effectively resolved without the use of discipline and its destructive side effects.

- Do you focus on lagging indicators such as incident rate? Lagging indicators in safety are misleading and cause a reactive

approach to managing safety. During periods of low or no incidents, it is easy for leaders to assume everything is under control and do little or nothing. Then, when incidents occur, there is a jump to action... usually too little, too late.

- Are the organizational consequences aligned to support safe behaviors at all levels? If safety is considered a priority above production, are you certain all your organizational systems support this?

- Do your incident investigations lead to improvements or just blame? Blame has no place in a high-performing safety culture.

- Is near miss reporting actively encouraged or is it inadvertently discouraged by too often leading to blame and discipline?

- Do you rely too heavily on strategies like safety signage, check-lists and meetings to drive critical safety behaviors? Scientifically speaking, these are all antecedents (events that come before behavior) and have limited impact on sustaining behavior.

- Is your hazard identification and remediation process as effective as it should be? When employees believe that the company is not taking care of hazards they are much less willing to participate fully in safety programs.

Many hazard programs inadvertently discourage reporting and fail to provide timely feedback to those dealing with the hazards. Often simple adjustments can make these systems more effective.

Using the questions above as a guide, organizations can identify improvements in leader safety behaviors. Those behaviors must also be systematically nurtured and sustained, just like other critical business behaviors. Doing so will result in long-term improvements, whether used in conjunction with BBS or alone. As with all other parts of business, leadership is crucial. How effective is your safety leadership?

To learn more about effective safety leadership, read **Safe by Accident? Take the Luck out of Safety – Leadership Practices that Build a Sustainable Safety Culture** by Dr. Judy Agnew and Dr. Aubrey Daniels.

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[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 improvement 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.

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