Food Safety, Product Safety, and Public Protection
The Critical Role of Behavior

By Cloyd Hyten, Ph.D., CPT

Food contamination problems as recent as salmonella-tainted peanuts from a Georgia plant have raised the public ire and questioned our confidence in corporations to insure food safety. Cindy Ashworth and Darnell Lattal have written a piece addressing the failure of senior leadership to make the right choices to prevent public harm (see *NUTS! When Leadership Abandons Ethics in the Name of Profits*). Below we will discuss the issues that arise even when company leadership is truly diligent about employee and public safety.

> A behavioral approach does not assume that people are malicious; indeed most safety problems are more often the unintended result of weak behavior management practices.
>
> – Cloyd Hyten

BEYOND STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

Most food companies have cleaning materials and procedures, inspection procedures, training and management practices designed to monitor and prevent food contamination during production and storage. So where do companies go wrong? When contaminated food reaches the public, it is the result of a chain of behaviors, from frontline workers through senior management. Proper materials, equipment, and standard operating procedures are essential for quality manufacturing processes of any kind. But they are not sufficient. Judy Agnew and Gail Snyder ask in the 2008 book _Removing Obstacles to Safety_, "Even if people are trained and have the right equipment, do they all follow the procedures learned in training and/or use all the equipment provided?" (p.16). The answer is often no. Human behavior often thwarts the procedures so carefully documented on paper. People fail to use equipment properly or they find shortcuts to operating procedures. A behavioral approach does not assume that people are malicious; indeed most safety problems (those involving personal injury to the worker and those that can harm the public) are more often the unintended result of weak behavior management practices. To address this problem it is important to understand why people would behave in ways that risk personal or public safety, and to then design effective behavior management systems that support the critical behaviors necessary to prevent harm.

Rather than waiting for errors, injury, or public harm to occur before taking action, it makes sense to identify the precursors to these events.

"WHY WOULD ANYONE DO THAT?"

People are often mystified why someone would, knowing the risk to personal or public safety, ever behave in risky fashion. Training and regular reminders seem to be the standard management practices utilized to prevent this. In the language of applied behavior analysis, these are antecedents, and they alone are not up to the task. The reason is that consequences, events following our behavior, exert far more influence over long-term patterns of behavior. Careful study of the role of consequences has revealed some surprising facts. First, relatively minor consequences, such as reduced effort, greater comfort, or saved time, often encourage behavior that risks death or injury to oneself or others. This occurs because of a kind of "behavioral economic" phenomenon known as delay or probability discounting. The value of significant consequences, such as injury, ill health, or harm to public safety, is reduced by delays or the low probability of something bad happening. The fear of injury then, on a moment-by-moment basis, influences us less than the more immediate and

certain consequences of saved time or effort, or dealing with pressure to get production going. Fear of harm to the public is an even more remote and unlikely consequence, and is therefore especially weak in influencing whether we behave in harmful or safe ways. Second, simply trying to deal with safety issues by threatening and using punishment for violations isn't sufficient either. Management procedures dedicated to punishing errors often drive people to cover up incidents or

near misses, and can lead to negative side effects such as a hostile work atmosphere. What can be done about this?

BE PROACTIVE: BUILD AN INFRASTRUCTURE TO REINFORCE THE RIGHT BEHAVIORS

Rather than waiting for errors, injury, or public harm to occur before taking action, it makes sense to identify the precursors to these events—the critical behaviors that

company personnel need to engage in to operate safely and to make safe products. Target these behaviors for frequent observation, recording, and reinforcement by co-workers and management. Behavior-based safety programs can accelerate these behaviors so they become consistent habits that are done correctly with or without anyone watching, and all in a non-punitive, positive approach that personnel embrace. For example, target behaviors of hourly workers for improving food safety might include proper equipment sanitizing, running lab tests at regular intervals and with precision, reporting hazards immediately, conducting and reporting out on frequent behavior observations. Critical supervisory and management behaviors might include following up on fixing hazardous conditions, providing feedback and recognition to hourly workers, and incorporating safety into all operational decisions. Management systems can be developed to support this "human behavior infrastructure" on an ongoing basis. The systematic application of concepts and tools from behavioral science is necessary for a complete approach to keeping workers safe and insuring that food quality standards are upheld to protect the public from harm.

We at ADI believe that the human behavior element is the key to sustained improvements in performance and safety. Contact us to ask how ADI can help you address your food safety, personal safety, or product quality concerns and challenges. To read more about Behavior-Based Safety, you may purchase the book *Removing Obstacles to Safety* here.

• • • • •

[About the Author]

CLOYD HYTEN, PH.D., CPT

For more than 20 years, Cloyd Hyten has been a dedicated thought leader in the field of performance improvement and brings a systems perspective to organizational safety. Cloyd has presented papers at national conferences, served on the Editorial Board of the Journal of Organizational Behavior Management and co-authored a book on improving performance in work teams. Outside of work, Cloyd enjoys history, food and football.

[About ADI]

Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing remains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

CONNECT WITH US

aubreydaniels.com/stay-connected
web: aubreydaniels.com
blog: aubreydanielsblog.com
twitter: twitter.com/aubreydaniels