BY TERRY L. MATHIS

Unions and Behavior-Based Safety: The 7 Deadly Sins

OSHA, under the new administration, is focusing toward culture and proactive approaches to safety. Behavior-based safety (BBS) is one such approach that has a proven track record of success. However, several unions have openly opposed BBS and have openly stated their position on the Internet.

We should recognize that their concerns and complaints are real and valid. Some approaches to BBS have caused problems, and the results have been negative for unions and their members. But the next question should be: Is this problem the result of a flaw in the core philosophy of BBS, or is it the result of poor methodology? The fact that there have been hundreds of successful union-friendly BBS methods at union sites suggests the latter.

> Perceived by some as union unfriendly, behavior-based safety methods have been successfully applied at a number of union sites. Learn the keys to making it work.

The truth is that BBS is a label applied to everything from safety incentive tokens to some very rigid and structured processes. Many of these processes have evolved over the years, and the consultants who designed them have changed their positions about some basic issues. Putting a single label on all these varied methods is misleading and inaccurate. However, if you subscribe to the idea that encouraging the use of specific precautions (safe behaviors) can decrease accidents, then the question becomes how to best do this and not cause the negative impact that some approaches have created.

Each union position paper was written as a criticism of a particular approach to behavior-based safety, but cumulatively, they form an overall critique of methods that are not only union unfriendly, but altogether ineffective. Our research cited 22 separate complaints that we grouped into seven categories. Unfortunately, these seven methods commonly are used in many BBS approaches and almost guarantee union resistance as well as sub-optimized results.

The seven deadly sins of BBS are:

Blaming – Believing, teaching or assuming that most accidents are caused by unsafe behaviors of workers. Starting with this flawed premise creates a shaky foundation and instant animosity for a behavioral approach. Studies that often are cited to make this point are questionable and misquoted. Most classification of accidents into behavioral categories referred to prevention rather than root cause. One study stated that if anyone could have done anything differently to prevent the accident, it was classified as caused by worker behavior.

Dean Gano, who developed a problem-solving methodology for NASA, argues in the book Apollo Root Cause Analysis that behaviors never can be the root cause of an accident, since there always is a cause for the behavior. Starting BBS with such statements or assumptions suggests that workers are to blame and must solve their own problems. Ignoring conditional and organizational issues that can cause both accidents and unsafe behaviors is a formula for failure: failure to produce maximum results and failure to solicit union support.

Confronting – The belief that BBS must target the unsafe behaviors that cause accidents and eliminate them by worker-to-worker confrontation. The No. 1 reluctance of workers to be observers is the fear of confrontation. They are willing to watch and identify potential risks, but they truly dread having to convince their fellow workers to change.

There is a sense of pride in the way work is performed (especially among experienced workers) and such confrontations are a rude invasion of this pride. The first reaction usually is, "What makes you think you know more about safety than I do?" The training that observers receive in most BBS processes falls short of qualifying them as safety experts. It falls completely short of preparing them to successfully confront and change behavior on the spot. The whole

idea of confrontation assumes that the problem can be solved by the individual and ignores the impact of other influences (i.e., conditional, organizational, cultural, etc.). Kerry Patterson et al., in their recent book *Influencer*, suggest that direct confrontation is almost always ineffective in producing a change in behavior.

Idealism – The belief that BBS is a silver bullet that can replace your other safety efforts. Some of the academic experts in BBS have espoused the theory that BBS is some kind of miracle cure for all that ails safety. Such assumptions are alluring to managers who potentially could solve all their problems with one pill that they don't have to swallow. In fact, giving this pill to workers potentially could absolve managers of all responsibility in safety and give them a handy scapegoat for anything that goes wrong.

In addition, managers may think they can save money in their budget. Instead of spending money to fix things and make them safer, they simply can alter the workers' behaviors to avoid the hazards. BBS has been most successful as a supplement to traditional safety efforts, not a replacement or redundant process.

Punishing – The belief that it is OK to use punishment for failure to shape behaviors. Discipline is a tool that infers blame and willful disobedience. Attempts to use discipline in voluntary processes almost always fail and cause resistance. When early behavior-based safety processes tried to use discipline as a tool to establish behavioral change, the unions instantly protested.

This approach created the perception that BBS was being used to get union brothers and sisters spying on each other. Including behaviors on a BBS checklist that overlap or duplicate safety rules or procedures almost ensures that punishment will follow observations.

Isolationism – The belief that management should be completely omitted from BBS processes. Some approaches to BBS utilized workers exclusively and asked managers and supervisors to take a hands-off position. This hindered the BBS process from being able to address organizational issues and furthered the stigma of blaming workers and expecting them to work out their own behavioral problems.

Exclusion – The belief that it is not necessary to involve unions in the decision to implement a behavioral approach. Many unions were completely excluded from the decision to apply BBS and from any discussions about how to structure the process or select participants.

Unions care deeply about the safety of the employees. Not involving the elected representatives in collaborative discussions about an employee-led safety process is an ineffective change strategy and most importantly, disrespectful.

Inflexibility – The belief that one form or methodology of BBS is right for every site. Ignoring cultural, regional, organizational and conditional differences from site to site and organization to organization was the norm among the early ap-

proaches to BBS. Academics tend to seek elegant, universal solutions and sometimes overlook the significance of site-to-site differences. Unions have good ideas of how to better fit safety processes to their sites and they were largely or completely ignored in favor of the "perfect" solution.

Unions have resisted behavior-based safety based on each of these seven problems, but BBS can be implemented in a union-friendly way that does not include these issues. In fact, unions have embraced BBS when they carefully replaced each of these seven concerns with more effective and union-sensitive approaches.

The right approach includes the following:

1. Rather than fixing the blame, focus on fixing the problems.

2. Realize that people make behavioral choices for a reason. If you don't change the reason, you probably won't change the behavior. So rather than confronting a fellow worker taking a risk, try to find out what is influencing that behavior, document it and take it to a steering team who will prioritize and address the issues.

3. Acknowledge that BBS is no silver bullet, but just another tool in your safety toolbox. Carefully separate BBS from traditional safety programs and allow them to work synergistically together without duplication or overlap.

4. Carefully separate any punishment from the process. BBS should be separate from traditional safety, and behaviors on BBS checklists should not overlap with rules and procedures. This ensures that no one is disciplined for BBS observation data.

5. Define management and supervisor's roles, responsibilities and expectations in BBS in such a way that they support without taking over the process. Enforce these guidelines to ensure they are executed properly.

6. Include the unions in the decision to implement BBS, and in the design and customization of the process for the site. Their input is valuable and essential to success.

7. Stay true to the basic tenets of BBS, but customize and innovate approaches to fit the culture, the site and any other programs in place, such as 5S and Lean and Six Sigma.

Behavior-based safety practiced and implemented with sensitivity to union concerns can achieve superior results without encountering the resistance of other approaches. Not only does the adoption of these methods enable greater success, but it enhances the durability and fit of the BBS process to the site in a way that makes the process more sustainable long-term. EHS

Terry L. Mathis is the founder and CEO of ProAct Safety. As an international expert and safety culture practitioner, he has worked with hundreds of organizations customizing innovative approaches to achieve and sustain safety culture excellence. He has spoken at numerous company and industry conferences, and is a regular presenter at NSC, ASSE PDC and ASSE Seminar-Fest. He can be reached at 800-395-1347 or info@proactsafety.com.