Behavior-Based Safety Programs—Should They Be Implemented?

Consider thinking about the other elements of an effective safety program that will be needed in order to support the BBS program.

BY GREG ZIGULIS

When you hear the phrase "Behavior-Based Safety" or BBS, what thoughts come to mind for you? I've found that the term BBS can mean very different things to different people and evoke very different feelings. Some folks have very positive feelings and success stories about programs they think of as BBS programs. Others have just the opposite: feelings of disdain and disappointment. One senior manager whom I spoke with recently told me that when he hears of "BBS," he thinks of managers that do "feel good" safety stuff who "have not progressed into the new millennium." It seems that many of those who are critical of BBS programs think of them as mechanistic and fault-based programs implemented by management teams that do not want to take "management" responsibility.

Some of the current variations of BBS programs seem to be far from the original structures and methods advocated for a BBS program, which would have incorporated many other things. For example, whether or not a site was actually "ready" to implement a program, the designation of program "champions," the establishment of a steering committee for the process, the development of behavioral checklists that identify standardized "safe" or "at risk" behaviors, significant training for management and observers to include methods and options for communication of concerns, consideration of effective data collection and use of findings, the potential for competition between teams (as a positive thing), and continued senior management support. BBS programs also incorporated a model for thinking about things that drive or influence observed behaviors, for possible change.

If companies implement a BBS program just to "check a box" to indicate to the corporate office that "yes" they have a BBS program, then questionable motives may be involved and important considerations in injury reduction may be getting missed—since there are a multitude of organizational, personal, and physical safety issues that contribute to risk.

I'm aware of several companies that have implemented programs based upon the original BBS concepts but with modifications that they felt necessary. They sometimes call these programs something else yet retain components, including checklists, training, communication, and analysis of why certain actions are taken—*"why" certain decisions are made.*

One manufacturing company did not want its BBS observers to capture anything but at-risk behaviors from their observations, thus excluding the identification of physical or other hazards. However, observers at the plant found it difficult to convince employees that while they were focusing on worker behaviors for the moment, the company would address unsafe conditions and circumstances another way. The observers and site management wound up capturing physical hazard information like this to supplement other inspection processes, but "outside" of their BBS data collection system. Not all companies and locations have the strongest processes for identifying and fixing non-optimal physical conditions.

Significant physical demands placed on employees, created by parts presentation or work-cell design, were often identified through the "observation" process and this fed into other improvement processes. Ultimately, many improvements were made that way. And what about consideration for other simple human factors design elements? Certainly, there are many things that contribute to why employees do what they do, which can include workplace design elements that can lead to human error. Not everything that an employee does is a conscious decision, and humans make errors. As it turned out, over time, the "observations" became more of a "dialogue," employee hazard recognition was raised, and things tied together well for overall improvement.

Another EHS manager (in the construction industry) has a program in place that she thinks of as a BBS program but calls by another name. Her organization is small and with limited administrative ability. She established a critical behaviors checklist and has trained people to conduct observations and mandates them, but she utilizes the collected information on more of a real-time basis. The company is not able to manage a large database to track and trend observations, but it reviews observations quickly and takes prompt action when appropriate to address issues (behavioral or otherwise). Taking prompt action and communicating with employees about those actions helped employees understand that they were being paid attention to, and this resulted in greater employee involvement.

BBS Pro's and Cons

If you are considering or being asked to implement a BBS program, here are some pro's and cons to think about:

Pro's of a BBS or BBS style program:

- Can give employees a meaningful way to support a company's safety efforts and to help influence site culture.
- Can help identify previously unrecognized hazards. You may hear things like, "I never thought of that as a hazard, but I guess you're right!"
- Can provide a means to learn about unfamiliar work areas.
- Can result in employees thinking about safer ways of doing things not only at work but off work and with family.
- Can provide a system for tracking and trending improvement.
- Can teach "tools" that can be used in other processes.
- Can tie well with incident investigation concepts and processes.

Cons of a BBS or BBS style program may include:

- Plant management may expect miracles. BBS can be beneficial, but operational management should understand that this is not "all" that is needed to achieve world-class status.
- Some employees may never overcome a fear of being reviewed by, or reviewing, their peers.
- The program may be seen as a disciplinary or fault-finding program, even when clearly not intended to be so.
- If not rolled out well, BBS programs can backfire and take significant work to correct. It is easy to have "false starts."
- Over time, observations may tend to get completed "last minute" to meet goals; companies need to provide adequate time to complete observations well and avoid "pencil whipping."
- Just like "inspection" programs, BBS programs require good sharing and management of data to avoid the piling up of results, which become useless if sitting in a pile of other papers.

BBS in Relation to Other Programs and an EHS Management System

Beyond thinking about starting a BBS program in and of itself—if you have not already done so, consider thinking about the other elements of an effective safety program that will be needed in order to support the BBS program. For example, some companies tie the concept of supervisory "Leadership" (in safety) into their BBS programs and rollout. This is because there needs to be a management team and supervisory structure that understands the role it plays and provides support to the overall process, in order for a BBS program to work. Collecting data and asking a person to consider changing his work practices in an environment where a supervisor does not "get it" nor work to support the process will likely result in not just failure, but also a fair amount of laughter. If your supervisors do not understand their role in safety programs, your company might not be ready to start a BBS program.

Also, many would say that a BBS program can be a helpful thing, but it should be just one part of an organization's programs, and beyond that, should be part of a comprehensive EHS Management System.

BBS Implementation Considerations

Conduct a literature search regarding BBS and other alternatives. Other program ideas are routinely shared in magazines, EHS-related conferences, and elsewhere. If you decide upon a BBS style program, plan to provide plenty of training and to monitor the rollout carefully.

Do not let your organization use BBS as a "crutch"—there must be complementary safety programs.

Schedule observations over the course of each month; be careful to avoid the "end of month catch-up" syndrome.

Management should be sure to communicate the message that it understands that employee actions (behaviors) can be driven by other workplace considerations that in part drive or influence behaviors and that it will work to correct those issues in some way, too.

After a while, programs can go stale. Plan for this eventuality, for example:

- Change observers
- Pair hourly with senior management . . . have the hourly observe the management.

Work toward making "observations" feel more like simple "conversations." Some employees simply freeze when observers show up with checklists, and this will not always "go away." The thought is that a less intimidating approach helps eliminate potential concerns about "power" from the visit and can result in better information sharing and dialogue.

Conclusion

Behavior-based safety programs can be a helpful part of an organization's EHS program. While BBS programs are not a panacea for all things safety, they can be helpful if implemented carefully and with other programs.

To have an effective BBS program requires implementation for the right reasons and with adequate planning, continued support, and resources. To be most effective and sustainable, it should be part of a comprehensive EHS Management System. **OHS**

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