A Brief History of Behaviour-Based Safety

In 1517, a German priest named Martin Luther wrote a tract called the 95 theses criticizing the Christian clergy for selling indulgences and nailed the document to the door of a church in Wittenberg, igniting centuries of warfare and sectarian violence. Behaviour Based Safety (BBS) isn't exactly in the same league as the Protestant Reformation, but within the realm of workplace safety, it's the next best thing.

Herbert William Heinrich & the Invention of BBS

Ironically, the Martin Luther of the BBS movement that would stir up so much passion and emotion in the breasts of safety professionals was a bureaucrat who worked for an insurance company. In 1931, after reading thousands of industrial accident reports, Herbert William Heinrich of the Traveler's Insurance Company concluded that 88% of all accidents, injuries, and illnesses are caused by worker errors.

Heinrich's work was the 95 theses of safety, and it spurred a movement. If human error was the real cause of accidents, the key to safety was to observe workers, identify what they were doing wrong, and change their behaviour.

It was at roughly this time that the American psychologist, B.F. Skinner was conducting experiments in the malleability of human behaviour. Skinner's work helped spur the formation of

scientific methods of studying and improving human behaviour. These behavioural methods were applied to industrial accident prevention. The consultant Dr. E. Scott Geller is credited with coining the term “Behaviour Based Safety” in 1979.

Like a religious sect, BBS has both its true believers and passionate critics. The principal criticism of BBS is that it’s too one-dimensional. The anti-BBS view is that human behaviour is just one cause of accidents and that multi-faceted programs are the key to safety.

Six Pitfalls to Avoid When Implementing BBS

BBS is a theory, not a program. It can’t save lives or prevent injuries unless and until its principles are translated into workable plans and processes. The job of implementation falls not to scientists and psychologists but safety professionals like you. In his groundbreaking work, Dr. Geller identified six common pitfalls to avoid when implementing a BBS system in an actual workplace setting.

1. Not Teaching BBS Principles to Participants

Geller says it’s important to teach the people participating in the program not just BBS methods but the theory behind them. Otherwise, the program is apt to come across as just a “flavour of the month.”

2. Lack of Bottom-Up Involvement

Some companies’ programs are top-heavy and fail to get their line workers and operators adequately involved.

3. Invisible Top-Down Support

Just paying for a BBS program isn’t enough. Management must understand and buy into the BBS principles and effectively communicate its support for the program across all levels of

the organization.

4. Lack of a Champion

Geller says it’s crucial that one or more managers emerge as champions who demonstrate their personal commitment to BBS principles and ensuring they’re actually implemented on the workshop floor.

5. Mixing Goals with Purpose or Mission

Purpose is the mission of the safety program; goals define specific outcomes to further the purpose. Mixing up purpose and goals can lead to distorted outcomes.

6. Wrong Measure of Program Success

Developing the right process measures is crucial to program success. Geller warns against using injury rate as the sole standard of success because injury numbers can be manipulated and are a reflection of happenstance as much as actual behaviour.