

# Looking for Mr. Magic Bullet: Safety Culture or Behaviour-Based Safety?



By Barbara Semeniuk, BSc CRSP

How trends change: Five years ago, behavior-based safety was the latest and greatest tool in a health and safety practitioner's arsenal. By itself, it was supposed to greatly reduce incidents but it had to be done right—and therein lies the rub. Behaviour-based safety (BBS) systems are very finicky to employ, especially the peer-to-peer safety coaching that such systems use.

Workers have to be well trained to do the needed health and safety coaching. They can't discipline their peers and they have to avoid the perception that they are "ratting on each other." Their observations have to be anonymous if they're to work well. That's why some employers have supervisors perform the health and safety coaching aspect because they *can* discipline.

BBS systems also require continuous work to ensure that they're functioning as they should. However, some studies suggest that there's no relationship between the number of observations conducted and a reduction in incident rates, which contradicts the very premise of BBS.

*Explanation:* BBS works on the belief that instead of having just one health and safety person observing unsafe behaviours, it's more effective to have an active, engaged work force doing so—that is, hundreds of pairs of eyes are better than just one. The logical next step under BBS is that by engaging the workforce, you create a strong health and safety culture, one that uses peer pressure to promote good health and safety behaviours. It's the safety culture that you have created that reduces incident rates—not BBS itself, critics argue.

Proponents of safety culture believe that a strong focus by senior management on reducing incidents with bottom up participation from workers is better than BBS because safety culture has a stronger relationship to reducing incidents in the workplace. Thus, safety culture is the new “Mr. Magic Bullet” or the next greatest flavor that safety professionals can employ to reduce incidents.

However, there's a fly in the ointment. Organizations with strong corporate cultures often fail to reduce safety incidents in a meaningful manner because it's not a specified strategy. To convert “corporate” culture into “safety” culture, the company must have a mission to reduce incidents to very low levels or zero. In other words, management must plan to reduce incident rates, tie it into their overall management strategy and write policies and procedures that promote good health and safety practices.

In addition, internal barriers to health and safety performance must be overcome, such as incentives that promote unsafe behaviours. Think of gravel truck drivers who are paid by the load or pizza delivery drivers who, if they don't

deliver pizza within 30 minutes, must pay for the pizza out of their pocket. These types of payment plans can promote some very risky behaviours.

Companies with strong competition among the various departments can also develop internal barriers to good health and safety performance. If one department is safer than the others, the rest of the departments may perceive themselves as failures.

The picture that emerges then is very complex. BBS, in my opinion, can work well if done correctly to create a strong health and safety culture with lots of worker participation or peer pressure against unsafe behaviours. The workers, in essence, police themselves while management works on strategies to reduce incidents even further, remove internal barriers to safety success and create metrics that promote health and safety. In this manner, with strategic, focused measurements on reducing incidents and holding workers accountable for doing so, safety will be enhanced. But there's no one system that can achieve success—that is, there's no Mr. Magic Bullet!

What are your views on this?

***Insider Says:*** To convince executives in your company of the value of safety culture, see “[Brief Senior Management: The Importance of Safety Culture](#).”

**Ms. Barbara Semeniuk BSc. CRSP is President of [Purcell Enterprises Ltd.](#), a loss control management firm that specializes in health and safety auditing, and is a member of the OHS Insider Board of Advisors. If you wish to discuss this article, call her at 780-951-0867 or email her at [bls1284@telus.net](mailto:bls1284@telus.net).**