

## BEHAVIOUR BASED SAFETY PROGRAMS

## Bosses behaving badly

If the workplace is hazardous "accidents" will inevitably occur. So why is it, asks Cathy Walker of the Canadian Autoworkers' Union (CAW), that it is workers that are getting the blame?

**B**EHAVIOUR-BASED safety programs seek to identify unsafe behaviour and punish those who practice it and identify safe behaviour and reward those who practice it.

Is this model, however, rather simplistic? Our social and economic systems are hierarchical. Within the workplace this is translated into those who own and control the workplace and those who work there.

And it is this concept of control which we must understand if we are going to make safer workplaces. For those who control the workplace must, by definition, have more influence on whether it is safe or unsafe. And those people who control the workplace are employers.

Those who work there are workers and they, in our social and economic system, have extremely little control over the workplace. So the question really is, whose behaviour needs to be modified?

Is the idea of behaviour-based safety not really just a less fatalistic version of "accident proneness" that wonderful theory that says that some people just can't stop hurting themselves?

By this logic, of course, we see who the most accident prone people are in our society. They are underground miners, construction workers, and loggers.

Office workers must of course be extremely careful and safe people because they get hurt far less often.

And it is in these rather extreme examples that we see the fundamental flaw in the logic of the concept of behaviour based safety. It assumes that the nature of the workplace and the work itself is less important than people's behaviour.

This is nonsense. Some workplaces are extremely hazardous and those are (usually) where people die at work. Others are less so and those are where people tend to avoid death and serious injury. It isn't their behaviour that determined their safety; it is the nature of the work.

## Accident proneness?

Let us look at the old warhorse, the theory of "accident proneness".

This whole idea of "accidents" (we never call them "deliberates", do we?) we need to examine.

It assumes that workers are by their nature careless. They are at a minimum foolish and at worst stupid.

The accident proneness theory is what Robert Sass - former Director of Saskatchewan's Occupational Health and Safety Division, known as the father of the three worker health and safety rights - called the "village idiot" theory of accident causation. Because it assumes that workers are stupid. We need to teach them to "be safe" to "act safely".

It assumes that workers have Choice and that they are making Bad Choices and are thus hurting themselves.

If you get your arm ripped off at the pinch point of a conveyor, you've made a bad choice. You should have... what? Worked somewhere else? Refused to work near the unguarded conveyor? Told your supervisor ... and told your supervisor ... and told your supervisor ...

But the supervisor didn't listen.

He did nothing. Or the supervisor told his supervisor and he did nothing. Or the part was on order and it wasn't installed yet (why wasn't it installed in the first place?). Or you should have told your health and safety committee... but you did... and, they did nothing.

As a result of using the "B-Safe" behaviour based training system, the Rochester (New York) Gas & Electric Company lists these examples of safe behaviours brought to "habit strength":

1. safety glasses
2. vault protection
3. wheel chocks
4. gloves
5. hard hats
6. safety glasses (again)
7. hearing protection
8. proper backing

Indeed, this list really sums it all up. The kind of safety behaviour which workers can choose or not, is really extremely limited.

Wearing personal protective equipment, while useful in some circumstances, is hardly the fundamental issue.

Rather, it helps to divert attention from the real issue, making the workplace itself safer and healthier. Not a word is said in this list about recommending measures to quieten equipment, guard equipment, eliminate material falling on workers' heads, providing mechanical lifting devices.

There is no mechanism for the workers to discipline management, is there, when there is no guard on the machine?

There is no opportunity for the

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workers to send the supervisor home for the day when he or she tells someone to drive a forklift with bad brakes. Yet who else is closest to knowing what is safe or unsafe in the workplace? It is the workers. It is their health and safety that is at risk. It isn't management that's going to be hurt.

## Management control

In 1975, US safety manager Dan Petersen said in *Safety Management: A Human Approach*: "Safety today...is not as much an environment problem as it was. Our primary job is not to control 'things'. Safety today is a people problem. We are in a situation where we must learn to understand people and where we must learn to control people's behaviour..."

"When we talk about the management control of accidents, we really mean to talk about how management can control the behaviour of people. When we talk of how management can control the behaviour of people, we really mean, for all practical purposes, how management can get those people to want to operate in the manner management wants.

"This of course, is motivation. All safety in the final analysis depends on motivation. The American worker today must be motivated to work and motivated to work safely."

So Petersen says that workers are not just stupid, they are also lazy. I do not believe that. Workers are already motivated to work safely, given the choice. The workplace reality, however, is that most choices are not theirs to make.

Robert Sass and Richard Butler of the Saskatchewan Department of Labour in 1977 also did not agree with Petersen. In their excellent paper, *The Accident proneness theory: A dead horse that won't lie down*, a thorough canvass of published accident prevention theory, they have this to say about Petersen's position: "Dan Petersen's approach to safety is not based on any scientifically

## UK report 30 years behind the times

A new UK government backed report shows some academics are revisiting behavioural safety arguments discredited 30 years ago.

The 1998 Health and Safety Executive published report on "individual differences in accident liability" calls for "a more systematic and integrated approach to human failures and accident liability."

It says research "suggests there are two main personality types that are more likely to have accidents."

These are the "unstable extrovert" whose "sensation seeking, impulsive, aggressive" behaviour leads to accidents and the "unstable introvert" who makes unintentional errors because he or she is "anxious, distractible, rigid, neurotic".

This is an exact rehash of the conclusion of a discredited 1966 *American Handbook of Psychiatry* paper on "Industrial and occupational psychiatry". In guidance that also described "women employees" as an "occupational syndrome" caused by "physiological cycles" and which said occupational lung conditions resulted from "depressive reaction, anxiety reaction" it advises the correct diagnosis of "accident syndrome" is "impulsive character, anxiety reaction."

*Individual differences in accident liability. HSE. 1998. ISBN 07176 1575 8 American Handbook of Psychiatry, Basic Books, New York. 1966.*

reputable theory." And that, "Petersen's approach, then, is ideological, not scientific."

In the study of accidents in British factories, the results of which were published under the title *Safety or profit*, authors Theo Nichols and Pete Armstrong have this to say: "To sum up: each of the accidents we have reviewed occurred in the context of a process failure and whilst the men concerned were trying to maintain or restore production.

"In every case the dangerous situation was created in order to make it quicker and easier to do this. In every case the company's safety rules were broken.

"The process failures involved were not isolated events. Nor were the dangerous means used to deal with them. The men acted as they did in order to cope with the pressure from foremen and management to keep up production. This pressure was continual, process failures were fairly frequent and so the short-cutting methods used to deal with them were repeatedly employed. In each case it was only a matter of time before somebody's number came up."

## Due diligence

And of course one of the reasons behaviour based safety systems are increasingly popular is because some governments are getting tough on health and safety enforcement. Employers see the need for a "due diligence" defence so these behaviour based systems help them with the necessary paperwork to produce in court in the (rather unlikely event) that they actually do get caught.

Some companies are quite sophisticated in their understanding of the need for this due diligence defence. When the major US oil firms, Philips and Arco, for example, were responsible for dozens of fatalities in Texas refinery explosions in the past few years, as a result of downsizing, work intensification and "multi-skilling" (otherwise known as the "jack of all trades and master of none"), and contracting out, other employers in the downsizing mode in the quest for ever-greater profits have turned to behaviour based safety systems to give them a due diligence defence.

I know from the experience of our union that where employers emphasize statistics, there is almost always abuse of the reporting system as well as an abuse of return to work procedures.

## Safety awards

Safety awards in some form or another are almost always part of the behaviour based safety systems. They are the "carrot" to reward good behaviour.

But that behaviour is almost always based exclusively on not reporting injuries, not going off on lost time and not making a claim to the Workers' Compensation Board. It is almost never on ensuring that a lock is put on de-energized equipment, that a guard is replaced on a machine after maintenance, or that unsafe work is refused until it is made safe.

In these most unsafe industries, mining and forestry, it is piecework that is the most significant modifier of worker behaviour.

Our members of Local 598 employed at the Falconbridge mines in Sudbury call the additional monies earned through tonnage bonuses, "blood money".

And they are right. These bonuses persuade workers to cut corners and take chances. And when they do in the underground mining industry as in the case of fallers or cutters in the forest industry, they often lose their lives. And it is the same in less hazardous industries.

Where workers in the clothing industry or auto parts industry are paid in whole or in part on a piecework basis, they are often the ones who suffer the highest incidence of wrist, shoulder or back injuries. They work too hard and too fast and wear their bodies out.

If employers were serious about modifying safe behaviour among workers in these industries, they would stop the bonus system. And if governments were serious about ensuring that workers have no financial disincentive to engage in safe work behaviour, they would make the piecework and production bonus system illegal.

*Cathy Walker is Director, Health and Safety Department, Canadian Auto Workers (CAW). Based on a paper presented to the Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada (AWCBC) Congress Winnipeg, Manitoba, 7 July 1998*

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## Behaviour-based safety systems do nothing for health

They are not called behaviour based "safety" systems for nothing, says CAW's Cathy Walker. Health is not part of the equation.

The reason is quite simple. Injury statistics are easily measurable and easy to modify by persuading workers not to report them.

Health statistics are much more difficult to measure since occupational diseases such as cancers and lung diseases often occur many years after exposure. Since we rarely record them, why should we try to modify behaviour in this area? Yet it is ill-health which is the great disabler in our society.

Far more workers die of occupational disease each year than occupational injuries. They go uncompensated because of the nature of the workers' compensation system but these deaths do occur each year. Yet behaviour based safety systems ignore the whole issue of occupational health.

Some professionals experienced in health and safety know that the current emphasis on behaviour based safety systems is misplaced at best.

Patrick Ragan is director of corporate health, safety and environmental affairs for Rhone-Poulenc, North America, of Charleston, West Virginia.

Writing in the October 1997 issue of the American Society of Safety Engineers publication *Professional Safety*, Ragan has this to say: "By trying to improve safe behaviour by rewarding 'good' performance, firms commit the 'total quality sin' of measuring the wrong thing to reward.

"If the reward is based on fewer accidents reported, that is usually the result. Fewer accidents are reported - though no fewer accidents occur. This is especially true when the system calls for punishment if too many accidents are reported - the outcome is exactly the behaviour rewarded, which creates a system primed for increasingly severe accidents."

Ragan encourages us to take a closer look at the assumptions about behaviour based safety systems. He says: "It does not matter whether people have the best intentions and safe behaviour. If equipment does not have proper guards and interlocks, accidents will occur. Experience shows that hazards cannot be adequately controlled with good intentions and rigorous behavioural control."

Patrick Ragan describes behavioural based safety as the "silver bullet" of safety attempting to slay the "werewolves" while ignoring the "vampires and plagues". He says that in addition to silver bullets, you should also pack the "wooden stakes, garlic and vaccines".

In 1977, Sass and Butler said: "New approaches to accident prevention are being tried in Canada, and ..., these are based on a respect for the worker and his knowledge of his own job and workplace."

Now, more than 20 years later, we know these new approaches work and they, not worker behaviour modification, are the key to a safe and healthy workplace.

### Selected references

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