

It's the hazards, stupid

There's a lot of dangerous crap at work. You breathe it, you lift it, you touch it, you despair of it. Now, thanks to the Health and Safety Executive, you may have to swallow a lot more BS too. HSE is dusting off the discredited science of "behavioural safety" so however many hazards you face at work, when things go wrong you can safely assume "it's all your fault." Hazards editor Rory O'Neill reports.

In late June 2002, HSE published a report "that aims to promote more widespread application of behavioural safety principles to improve health and safety."

HSE's Dr Norman Byrom said: "There is potential to extend behavioural safety principles... more widely to encourage and promote behaviours that support the health and safety management system as well as the development of a positive health and safety culture."

So, what's wrong with that? The programmes reward workers when reported accidents fall. You can play safety bingo; sounds fun. There's prizes, maybe a car or a holiday. And those dangerous workers out there get their comeuppance.

The problem comes when you see what really happens. You might find reporting an

accident means your entire shift loses its bonus, so an accident magically disappears. You might find having an accident gets you fired. You will find there's only one winner, and it isn't you.

UK workers in the coal and steel trades have already seen BS schemes introduced with a detrimental effect on accident rates (*Hazards* 64). The schemes are being pushed in transport, communication and other sectors.

And behavioural safety targets workers' behaviour, when the overwhelming majority of health and safety problems at work – read your own reports, HSE – are caused by management corner-cutting, ignorance and a disregard for workers' health and safety.

In the US and Canada, major union organisations have warned against "blame the worker" BS systems.

UFCW, one the USA's largest unions, says: "By shifting the focus away from workplace hazards, such programmes leave significant safety and health problems unaddressed. UFCW members, stewards and representatives have worked hard to establish strong safety and health initiatives in all of our industries. Behaviour based safety programmes weaken these hard-won protections and discourage members from taking a more active role in the union."

Nancy Lessin has advised North American unions to avoid behavioural safety

initiatives. The health and safety coordinator for the union federation Massachusetts AFL-CIO says: "Focusing on worker behaviour as opposed to hazardous conditions as the cause of workplace injuries and illnesses leads to approaches where workers are blamed for 'bad' or 'unsafe' behaviours such as not wearing safety glasses or not following procedures. What gets missed by focusing on worker behaviour, what never gets asked, is 'why?'" (see right).

She adds: "Employers also like behaviour-based approaches because management is taken off the hook for fixing hazards.

"Gone are demands for engineering control, toxic use reduction, and ergonomic job design, as attention shifts to workers wearing personal protective equipment and using proper body position. Gone is any focus on how work is organised or

being restructured – issues like adequate staffing levels, limits on extended work hours, humane work load and work pace are not even considered."

In fact, BS schemes can increase the dangers of work. "These programmes and policies have a chilling effect on workers' reporting of symptoms, injuries and illnesses," says a policy resolution from AFL-CIO,



Unsafe and unsound

Instead of having a focus on identifying hazards and eliminating or reducing them, the emphasis of a behavioural safety programme is on getting workers to work around hazards that shouldn't be there in the first place.

Workers are supposed to duck, dodge, lift safely, wear personal protective equipment... When a worker is injured, it is his or her fault for not working carefully enough. Discipline can become management's preferred response to worker injury.

Even in cases where a behavioural safety programme is implemented with assurances that there will be no discipline, workers can face inquisitions when they report injuries to determine what "unsafe behaviours" they were engaging in.

Workers avoid these inquisitions by ceasing to report accidents and injuries. When injuries aren't reported, hazards don't get identified or corrected. Nancy Lessin



the USTUC. It adds this "can leave workers' health and safety problems untreated and underlying hazards uncorrected."

Just as worrying, the use of these schemes may undermine the well-documented "union safety effect," where union organisation delivers dramatic reductions in workplace accident rates (*Hazards* 78). AFL-CIO notes "these programmes frequently are implemented unilaterally by employers, pitting worker against worker and undermining union efforts to address hazardous workplace conditions through concerted action."

Nancy Lessin says unions have to be alert to dangers, and should have a ready response.

"To counter management's proposal of a behavioural safety programme, unions can propose a comprehensive worksite health and safety programme – focusing on identifying and eliminating hazards and utilising the recognised hierarchy of controls, which supports the elimination of hazards and the use of engineering controls as preferable to lower-level and less effective control measures such as using personal protective equipment.

"To counter an employer-proposed safety incentive programme that offers prizes to workers who do not report injuries, unions can propose that rewards be offered to

workers when they identify serious hazards or recommend ways to eliminate them."

Leo Gerard, international president of the North American steelworkers' union USWA, gives this advice: "Management's blame the worker programmes are as dangerous to our members as any other challenge that we face today. The USWA must oppose these programmes with all our energy. Instead we must work just as hard to implement comprehensive health and safety programmes that find and eliminate unsafe workplace conditions that cause injuries and illness to our members."

That's no BS. It's good advice to unions in every industry, everywhere.

NO BULL: A USWA behavioural safety campaign said "No BS: Eliminate hazards – don't blame workers." The union says a behavioural safety model goes: Identification>Evaluation>Duck! www.uswa.org/services/blameworker.htm

Information

Nancy Lessin has prepared a *What's wrong with behavioural safety programmes?* briefing for *Hazards* readers. It is available, along with other union-friendly resources, on the *Hazards* Unions and behavioural safety webpages at: www.hazards.org/bs
Strategies to promote safe behaviour as part of a health and safety management system, CRR430/2002 ISBN 0 7176 2352 1 price £15; also free in pdf format on the HSE research webpages. See page 30 for order details.

Carrots and sticks

Closely related to a behavioural safety approach are safety incentive programmes and injury discipline policies.

Safety incentive programmes offer prizes when no injuries are reported. Injury discipline policies deliver discipline or other punitive action such as drug testing when workers report injuries.

An injury discipline programme popular in the US is the "Accident Repeaters Programme," which identifies workers who have had a certain number of injuries – usually one or two in a 12 or 24 month period – and puts them in a programme where they get: Counselling if they report another injury; a written warning for their next injury; suspension for the next injury; and fired for a reported injury after that.

Another injury discipline programme popular in the US assigns a points system to injuries reported and/or compensation claims filed. An injury requiring only medical care and no days away from work is assigned one point; a lost-time accident is worth five points. When a worker reaches 30 points, he or she is fired. Nancy Lessin

Why, why, why, why, why?

Nancy Lessin is the top US expert on union responses to behavioural safety. She has this advice for union reps.

Health and safety approaches that focus on workers' behaviour condemn workers as the problem. Unions see workers as the solution.

There is no one better to identify the hazards on a job, or come up with ideas to eliminate or reduce those hazards, than the worker doing that job. If a job is being done "unsafely," a good rule of thumb is to "ask 'why?' five times."

For example:

Andrea got something in her eye at work. But why? Because she wasn't wearing her safety glasses.

But why? Because they were all scratched up and she couldn't see out of them.

But why? Because her employer bought the really cheap glasses that get scratched all the time.

But why? Because her employer wanted to save money.

But why? Because profits are more important to her employer than worker safety and health.

Asking "why" questions allows an inquiry to get to root causes – the source of the problem that will need to change in order to bring about a safer workplace.

Unions can then strategise about what it would take to get an employer to purchase adequate personal protective equipment, or use engineering controls to eliminate the need for workers to wear personal protective equipment, or in some other way make the workplace safer.

An approach that blames workers for their "bad behaviour" thwarts real prevention efforts. It's management behaviour that is putting workers' health and lives at risk, and management behaviour that must change in order to achieve safe and healthy workplaces.