

Green Beans & Ice Cream: The Remarkable Power of Positive Reinforcement

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Introduction

Appropriate recognition and reward plays a significant role in achieving permanent employee behavior change, and very importantly, in behavior change involving safety. However, traditional safety “incentive” programs have based recognition and rewards on *all* employees reaching a benchmark (or goal) on the lagging indicator of safety results. When recognition and rewards are based on everyone succeeding, negative peer pressure can occur, resulting in injury hiding. Even when *individuals* are rewarded for results only as opposed to being recognized for performing specific, safe behaviors, injury hiding may occur and good results-oriented safety data may not reflect the realities of the workplace.

Proactive, prevention-oriented processes that focus on identifying desirable safe behaviors and bringing those behaviors to habit level via constructive feedback and targeted positive reinforcement—behavior-based safety (BBS)—effectively produce employee behavior change without the unwanted side-effect of injury hiding. However, the inappropriate application of behavioral principles is common, thus leading to misconceptions about the efficacy of such processes. These misconceptions and misapplications must be addressed before a valid behavior-based safety (BBS) process can produce optimal and ongoing results.

The Fear of Recognition Processes

Safety managers often fear that safety processes that include employee recognition and reward create or encourage injury hiding. While it’s true that a poorly designed or incorrectly implemented process can lead to injury hiding, this is not an inevitable truth. A properly developed safety recognition and reward program can bring lasting behavior-change benefits without negative results such as injury hiding or favoritism. For example, using such a process, Heartland Food achieved a 90 percent reduction in injuries, lost work productivity, and Workmen’s Compensation costs—without injury hiding.

Does Recognition and Reward Really Work?

In a three-year study conducted by the American Society of Safety Engineers (ASSE) and published in *Professional Safety* magazine in 2004, 300 construction firms were tracked. Half of the companies studied refused to implement a safety process that included recognition and reward for the reasons previously mentioned; the other 150 companies felt they needed a safety recognition and reward strategy.

At the end of the three-year study, the firms that chose to implement safety processes with recognition and reward had injury rates that were 50 percent lower than the firms who refused to try a behavior change safety process that included recognition and reward.

Numerous case studies support these same findings, proving that such processes—when implemented with a contingency basis for recognition and reward—work. One DuPont site reduced all lost-time injuries to zero for three years. Georgia Pacific increased behavior-based safety observations and employee safety involvement by 44 percent. A Department of Energy operation reported \$2.2M in cost savings attributed to their BBS system. These are just a few examples of numerous successful behavior-based safety solutions, but several common objections continue to be raised regarding safety processes that include recognition and reward.

Most Common Excuses for Not Using a Behavior-based Safety Process that Includes Recognition and Reward

1. *"Why should I recognize and reward people to be safe? It's part of their job! That's why they get a paycheck . . ."*

There are several important reasons why a good recognition and reward strategy is vital for a successful safety process. Of course, the ultimate goal is the continued safety and well-being of your company's employees, but another more pragmatic reason is reduction of Worker's Compensation costs.

Unfortunately, even a few employees abusing the Worker's Compensation system can damage a company's fiscal health and professional reputation. The truth is, however, that most people do not want to be injured on the job. Even so, the astronomical cost of accident and injury still occurs. Recently, for example, a stevedoring company operating in the southeastern U.S. reported \$2.5 million in Worker's Compensation costs and more than 100 lost-time injuries in one year. And this company only had 300 employees! Consider the cost of legitimate Worker's Compensation claims, not only in dollars but in human suffering. Then consider mitigating such losses by investing in a proven process for making the workplace safer. Ultimately, no amount of safety training or equipment will protect your bottom line against Worker's Compensation fraud, but an effective process that creates an atmosphere of awareness and recognizes and rewards specific safe behaviors can work toward preventing or reducing the claims resulting from avoidable accident and injury.

As for the covers-everything paycheck, if it's true that company presidents, CEOs, and managers should receive recognition and rewards for outstanding performance such as increasing profits and expanding market share, shouldn't workers be rewarded for positive performance practices that advance the organization? A job becomes only a paycheck when no other on-the-job recognition or reward occurs. And while it's true that many people derive satisfaction for a job well done, even the most conscientious worker will cease to excel in a vacuum. Remember, employees leave supervisors, not companies. Lasting behavior change requires focused shaping and reinforcement. The same holds true at any level of employment—a fact that employers should keep in mind.

2. *"If we did have a safety process that includes recognition and reward, how would we prevent abuse and favoritism?"*

The concern here is usually that middle managers will recognize and reward only the employees they like, and exclude the others—causing a wave of personnel issues and complaints of unfairness.

The solution to this situation is one similar to a solution proposed by President Ronald Reagan, who negotiated arms reduction treaties in the 1980s with the former Soviet Union while suggesting this caveat: "TRUST, but VERIFY."

Don't implement a BBS process that is the equivalent of turning your managers loose with a blank checkbook. Instead, use a tool that provides managers a mechanism for on-the-spot recognition of good behaviors and that also includes the following elements:

- Is data-oriented with specific and verifiable measurement, preferably automatic enough to make measurement and data analysis painless, and also providing a safeguard against abuse and favoritism
- Involves individuals in voluntary learning and feedback opportunities
- Recognizes and rewards specific, observable, and measurable behaviors (customized to department and job function) that you want to increase such as proper lifting techniques, use of personal protective equipment (PPE), and so on.
- Generates excitement around behavior change with customized feedback, recognition, and reward opportunities
- Ensures that every manager, supervisor, and employee who contributes to strengthening the safety culture and a safer work environment will be rewarded

3. "Safety processes that include recognition and reward do nothing more than cause under-reporting of injuries. They produce no real behavior change."

As previously stated, behavior change approaches that use recognition and reward inappropriately can produce injury hiding. This phenomenon even has earned itself a nickname: "the bloody pocket syndrome." USA Waste, for example, was fined \$65,000 by OSHA because its cash safety incentive program was tied to a group of employees working a number of days injury free, thus promoting the tendency to hide injuries or near misses.

The common denominators in programs that encourage injury hiding usually involve the following:

- Giving team results-oriented awards that produce peer pressure and thus promote injury hiding
- Rewarding lagging indicator or trailing indicator measures such as working injury free or no near misses reported for a period of days

Use the Proactive Approach

Typically, before an employee experiences an injury, he (or she) has experienced nearly 300 unsafe "near misses" that involve taking a chance or risk but somehow escaping injury. These near misses reinforce the employee's belief that it is "ok" to take chances. On that 301st time, lightning strikes, and a recordable injury (or even a fatality) occurs.

Using a proactive approach that focuses on safe behaviors will give companies more of the results they want: a work environment with a higher awareness of safety, habit-strength safe behaviors, and fewer or no injuries. The proactive approach rewards the behaviors that employees

do right and alerts them to behaviors they are doing wrong. (Remember that every job is made up of a series of behaviors.) Though consistently successful, this proactive approach is viewed as “new school” and is inherently far more complex than the old-school approach to recognition.

With the old-school approach, all a manager has to do is count the safe work hours and hand out T-shirts accordingly. Working under the old-school system, the only thing an employee has to do to be “recognized and rewarded” is show up at work and hide injuries (or somehow avoid them).

With the new-school approach, managers have more to do initially, but employees are highly involved and own their safety process. Managers and employees must decide which behaviors to recognize and reward—those relevant to safety that address and impact real safety concerns. A system that operates without abuse or favoritism depends on regular and verifiable measurement and data collection. The new-school approach teaches employees that they can't just sit back and wait to receive a T-shirt. They have to actually do something: take a particular course of action or practice a particular behavior that ensures a safer workplace.

Remember, you don't want a safety process based on handing out tangible rewards for results that can be attained through injury hiding and falsification of data. You want a safety process that brings ongoing, real, and lasting behavior change. Achieving behavior change in employees requires that you train them in the process, provide regular feedback and recognition, enable them to provide feedback and recognition to themselves and to one another, and *reward* them socially (through acknowledgment or a celebration for reaching a percentage goal for proper lifting behaviors, for example) and/or occasionally with a meaningful, tangible.

Watch Out For Speed Bumps

Once you have made the decision to switch from an “entitlement” program to one that requires action, you can expect to hear plenty of grumbling. Middle managers will at first complain they have too much to do to recognize and reward employees for safe behavior. CAVE employees (Citizens Against Virtually Everything) will complain that they do not want to “fool with that stuff.”

Overcoming these complaints can be as simple as recognizing and rewarding middle managers and safety committee members for driving the behavior-based process. Many companies make involvement in BBS safety initiatives strictly voluntary, and find that when the process is a positive one, people soon ask to be involved. In any case, the no-name, no-blame approach to making on-the-floor safety observations is the optimal way to run a BBS process. In such a system, the employees who are willing to put extra effort into safety are the ones who earn the recognition and rewards available for doing so. That's what behavior-based safety is about: being rewarded for doing something right.

Why Middle Managers Must Be Rewarded

Squeezed from both ends and pulled in many competing directions, the last thing most managers and supervisors want is more work. Therefore, they can easily come to treat a safety initiative as their red-headed stepchild.

Most behavior-change programs fail to reward the supervisor, justifying this mistake with the attitude, “Why should I reward my supervisors? Isn't a paycheck enough?” Once again, the

answer to that question is “No!” As with any employee, middle managers who do not feel appreciated will avoid new behaviors that may initially require more work.

However, before you rush out and start recognizing and rewarding your middle managers, make sure you have a system in place that tracks their activities in delivering recognition and rewards. Typically, leaders should have measurable behavioral pinpoints that ensure their active support and promotion of the process. This system should provide information about whether supervisors are utilizing the process correctly and whether favoritism is at work, but most importantly should signal when they should be recognized for supporting the process.

Cash Incentive Versus Recognition

Cash is not king. Findings from studies conducted by Dr. Frederick Herzberg in 1959, and confirmed more recently by Bob Nelson, author of *1001 Ways to Reward Employees*, indicated that employees ranked *achievement* and *recognition* as the top contributors to job satisfaction. Money ranked a statistically insignificant 5th.

Yet, the corporate use of gift cards has increased exponentially in the past five years. According to New York-based Bain & Co., \$45 billion worth of gift cards were sold in 2003. However, studies show that even though employers meant for the cards to be used for a “goodie”—a treat an employee wouldn’t normally have—many employees end up using them to buy toothpaste, motor oil, and other necessities that have no lasting or personalized recognition value.

In short, gift cards are handed out as a “quickie” reward, often leaving the employee feeling less than congratulated. In addition, Kiplinger’s *Personal Finance* magazine reports that up to 40 percent of all funds loaded into gift cards go unredeemed. What a waste of money and what a waste of an opportunity to truly reinforce good performance! Companies may have even paid to inadvertently punish someone for their good work! After all, if your employees don’t even redeem such cards, how can you expect them to respond with changed behaviors?

Sincere recognition will produce superior job satisfaction, while cash will only produce average satisfaction. Of course, fair and comparable pay is a component of employee retention, but other elements elicit that feeling called *job satisfaction*. Many studies have shown that satisfied employees perform at far higher levels than those who are unsatisfied.

Why Does Recognition Work Better?

Almost everyone is aware of the 1920s Hawthorne Labs experiments conducted to survey the effects of different lighting levels on worker productivity. A group of employees from the plant who knew they were part of a study were placed in a special room to perform their normal jobs. Output was measured each day as lights were dimmed and brightened.

As the lighting was changed, productivity went up, eventually increasing by more than 30 percent. The engineers concluded that there was no correlation between productivity levels and a particular light setting. However, the sense of recognition and achievement the workers experienced from “being a part of things” translated into temporarily improved job performance.

The Hawthorne Effect explains why new initiatives that solicit input and ideas from employees often improve performance at the onset, but don't necessarily sustain it without the systematic use of ongoing, contingent recognition and reward.

Common Mistakes Made in Behavior-Change Initiatives

1. **Using the word *incentive* instead of *recognition*.** Remember, an incentive is akin to placing a giant hoop in front of your employees and saying, "Jump through and you get the treat!" What does this really communicate to our employees? Recognition says, "I like the way you did your job. You are a valuable employee and here's proof of my appreciation . . ."
2. **No top management support.** If top management doesn't support the program, middle managers will follow suit and the whole program will collapse like a house of cards.
3. **No middle manager buy-in.** Employees can spot indifference in a heartbeat. Theories of positive reinforcement tell us that recognized and rewarded behaviors are repeated. Negative reinforcement—getting people to perform through fear, threat, or intimidation—will never inspire above-and-beyond performance, and indifference will extinguish a behavior entirely. So if top management is eliciting adherence to a safety process through negative reinforcement or ignoring the process altogether, employee participation will be minimal (just enough to get by) at best, or will eventually cease to exist.
4. **No way to measure return on investment.** When writing an annual budget, does your company set out to make "a good profit," or do they put an exact number next to the dollar sign? They use an exact number; that's how they know if profits are on-target from one quarter to the next. The same is true when designing a safety process that includes recognition and reward. Establish measurable objectives that will clearly indicate behavior changes that impact safety results: the return on your investment. For example, a measurable objective might be "Decrease lost-time injuries by 50 percent during the first 12 months of the process." Note that this result *must* be driven by properly directed behavior change. In short, any successful safety process must be based on the following rule: If you focus on results, you *will not* get behavior change; if you focus on behavior change, you *will* get results.

Conclusions

After all is said and done, the evidence is clear that recognizing and rewarding people for upstream safe behaviors is a highly effective behavior-change tool, one that every successful manager should master.

Seventy-three percent of all employees report that they are not thanked or appreciated enough. In work environments where employees are thanked and recognized regularly for safe behaviors, their need for support and recognition are being met. This is a circular and continuous process of observing workplace behaviors, pinpointing safe behaviors, and giving feedback and positive reinforcement for those behaviors until they reach habit strength as evidenced by data. At that point, it is time to target other safe behaviors while monitoring those that have reached habit strength. These environments don't just "happen" overnight—they are created, with the help of a well-planned, behavior-based safety solution that includes reward and recognition.

Companies that cling to the misconception that, "a paycheck is recognition enough" or companies that reward only safety results have created a culture where employees will hide

injuries to be a "hero" or "help" the team to the detriment of any attempts to create a safe workplace—the real goal of any valid safety initiative.

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