# Selecting an *Effective* BBS Process

## Fundamental elements should guide decision making

**By Philip W. Hurst and William L. Palya**

BEHAVIOR-BASED SAFETY (BBS) has gained acceptance within many industries as an important component of ongoing SH&E initiatives. Based on the science of applied behavior analysis, BBS now has an established history of reducing the growing load on profitability caused by safety issues. In fact, BBS processes have decreased incident rates by as much as 70 percent or more in organizations throughout the world (Sulzer-Azaroff and Austin 18).

As a result, the question is no longer, "Should we use BBS?" but "Which BBS system will provide the most bang for the buck?" The challenge now is learning how to separate effective plans from those that are not truly rooted in the behavioral sciences. A few guidelines can help decision makers choose a quality technology that delivers results. Being aware of some fundamental elements is the first step. These elements include an inclusive plan for all employment levels; candid information regarding hits and misses; streamlined process as opposed to paper-heavy applications; and balanced projections on potential results. Decision makers should also seek out specialists who possess a thorough knowledge of applied behavior analysis and its applications in various work settings. In addition, company executives must be able to objectively analyze the existing corporate culture to determine whether the organization is ready to institute a process based on measurement, accountability and positive recognition.

### Flexibility & Alignment

With an initiative as crucial as achieving optimal safety, an organization's decision makers must realize that a quality BBS implementation is not a program, but an integrated management "process." Corporate leaders who believe that the time and effort involved in using a BBS process positively impact business will select a process that is not presented as a stand-alone procedure.

The best process includes detailed plans for involving all employee levels—from executive ranks to frontlines. It should also involve analysis of work structures; examine conflicting priorities; and include a design for aligning every work process with the safety process as interlocking systems. For example, a process with a nonintrusive observation method that does not force employees to stop ongoing tasks throughout the day is desirable. The process should also be flexible enough to include self observation and/or peer observation and data collection, and be easily applicable to various jobs—ranging from executives and office workers to supervisors and production employees.

The best applications encourage this alignment in that all employees work from the same strategy. This means that despite differing pinpoints (or targeted behaviors and results), because they are trained in the same methodology, people at every level can share successes, variations on feedback and reinforcement, learning from one another and working together to enhance the process.

### Data Availability & Shared Learning

While it may be human nature to emphasize positive data, BBS specialists should also candidly identify and discuss those occasions that produced less-than-stellar results. Reluctance to share such information is unacceptable in any field that strives for increasing precision. When considering a

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BBS process, decision makers should ask what elements could cause or have caused initiatives to fail. A good practitioner will share those reasons. Detailed case histories that include before and after data are a good indicator that the BBS process has replicable validity. Key personnel at these companies should be contacted and asked whether the process is still viable in those organizations and why—or why not. Remember that if a process has not been maintained, it may not necessarily be due to a flaw in the methodology. A good process can languish because of poor management support, layoffs, mergers and acquisitions, or other organizational events. With that in mind, decision makers should ask specific questions of people who actually use the process and factor that information into their assessments.

### Streamlined & Nonintrusive, But Inclusive

Some processes may add tag-on and conflicting tasks that confuse and dilute BBS methods. Thus, firms should beware of models that require endless diagrams and masses of paperwork. Overuse of reports and forms cloud the simplicity of BBS and render it clumsy, slow and too complex to apply, eventually hobbling the process.

Most workers are already burdened by administrative tasks that take time away from their primary responsibilities. In the hundreds of implementations in which the authors have been involved over a period of 20 years, clients have repeatedly expressed a clear concern about administrative burden, stating strongly that experience with new initiatives indicates that the heavier the administrative load created by a process, the less likely it is that the process will be maintained.

Streamlined essentials, rather than unnecessary additions, will increase acceptance of the BBS process and ease its continued implementation in the given work environment. These essentials include uniform training of observers; use of simple yes/no scorecards; verbal feedback mechanisms; visual feedback methods that can be updated (regular graphing or posting of data on a whiteboard or other accessible bulletin); and a schedule of recognition and celebrations that coincides with goal achievement. Processes that contain only a few of these basic elements may sound sufficient. However, data collection, feedback and contingent positive recognition and reward are fundamental elements of BBS and should be included.

Existing literature contains misrepresentations and misconceptions about behavioral theory and the principles underlying BBS. (For example, see Reitman's 1998 rebuttal of Alfie Kohn's book *Punished By Rewards.*) Critics warn of the danger of dangling a carrot in front of people as a reward for safe behavior. These arguments are often based on examples that fail to meet behavior analytic criteria and are then generalized to all aspects of behavioral application. Some people suggest that BBS is counterproductive and potentially detrimental to safety (Smith 37; Ragan 26). Ultimately, the rational path to selection of an effective process lies between that which views BBS as a "silver bullet" and that which dismisses it as a "nonproductive myth."

The process selected should discourage negative confrontation and use data as a tool for recognition rather than punishment. It should also discourage escalating tangible rewards. Expensive rewards can be especially dangerous when used with safety because people may fail to report near-hits and minor accidents simply to win the award. Social recognition, celebrations and small tangibles that are relevant to a safety theme or to the job at hand are best. The process should encourage mainly social recognition mixed with meaningful small tangibles. For example, some organizations use grab-bag gifts such as theater tickets, tools or gift certificates as tangibles. Rewards should be tied to the achievements that earned them or they will be meaningless to the performer.

In short, it is best to select a process that acknowledges the importance of ongoing strategies for identifying safe behaviors; works seamlessly with other important SH&E efforts involving systems, structures and equipment; and recognizes and rewards every person for his/her involvement in improving workplace safety.

### Organizational Readiness Assessment

With any BBS initiative, the process must become an integral part of the corporate philosophy or culture. When an initiative is consistent with this philosophy, personnel charged with implementing and participating in it make confident decisions regarding its implementation. They are also motivated to successfully carry out the initiative because it is consistent with and supported by the values of the corporate culture. A particularly important ramification of a consistent corporate philosophy is that personnel will willingly notice and report critical feedback data. This confidence level is essential if BBS is to accomplish corporate goals and remain active and productive.

Corporate philosophy is the organizing principle that provides the cohesive framework to bring life and growth to an organization. It is as broad as the firm's mission and as specific as goal strategy. Therefore, the philosophy must correctly incorporate the role of people in the organization and be based on a correct understanding of human behavior. An effective BBS process complements existing SH&E activities when those activities do not involve consequences that conflict with its positive and proactive nature.

Corporate philosophy is made up of many components, such as market niche, product family and business model. One quickly realizes, however, that employees are the backbone of any organization.

## Checklist for Selecting an Effective BBS Process

•The process includes actionable plans for involving all employee levels.

•The process provides a structure for analyzing the requirements for achieving business results (e.g., production goals) and addresses issues of competing priorities between those results and safety.

•The process is nonintrusive, meaning it does not take large chunks of time or interrupt the daily workflow.

•Peer-to-peer and self-observation strategies are included as part of the training package.

•Training is consistent at all employee levels so that everyone works from a consistent but flexible knowledge base.

•The BBS specialist can cite and explain real-life applications and reasons for their ongoing success or failure.

•The specialist provides data from actual implementations as well as contact information for key personnel at those sites.

•The process requires performance measurement, feedback and contingent recognition and reward.

•The process does not add large amounts of paperwork, reports and forms. It is straightforward with easy data collection and feedback mechanisms.

•The fundamental element of the process is positive feedback on performance, and recognition and reward contingent on performance.

•Feedback is constructive and data-based.

•The process recommends an emphasis on social recognition and reward, rather than on escalating or large tangible rewards.

•The process complements and does not conflict with existing SH&E activities, unless those activities are behaviorally counterproductive.

Thus, for BBS to thrive, the most important part of a corporate philosophy is the relationship between the organization and its individuals—the explicit or implicit specification of what the organization wants from its employees and what it thinks will make them behave in the desired way.

Behavior analysis—the foundation of BBS—has an intrinsic connection to accountability. This applied science is successful because it structures its descriptions in a task-oriented fashion, so that illusionary mental states do not confuse performance analysis and diminish the ability to take productive action to address problems. As a result, behavior analysis offers concrete solutions to behavior issues that maintain or increase overall productivity better than any other approach.

The task of BBS programs is to structure the physical and cultural environment in the workplace to produce the desired behavior and eliminate the undesired behavior. Adhering to the structure of accountability and reliability, if safety is the goal, then observable safe behavior is the final assessment of the program's adequacy.

How does this approach relate to corporate philosophy? If people truly are the gears that run an organization, then the most important activity of that organization must be the positive recognition/reward/reinforcement of desired behavior. If reward occurs indiscriminately, then the success or failure of the business—or in the case of BBS, a safe or unsafe workplace—is left to luck. If the business proactively moves individuals toward better performance, then all other elements fall into place. The corporation is its personnel, which is the sum of its individuals, and each individual is primarily governed by the consequences of his/her own behavior.

A good BBS process should include the organization's readiness for applying a process that depends on a culture of positive change through performance consequences. If the corporate philosophy is to modify the behavior of each individual using mostly positive consequences that are based on real data, then that company can put a successful, accountable process into place.

### Conclusion

As business and industry executives seek out quality BBS processes for their organizations, they must analyze several elements in order to select a high-quality approach. The first few elements—active safety roles for all employment levels, the integrity and ability of BBS representatives to report accurate application data, verifiable case studies and contacts, streamlined procedures and balanced performance projections—are fundamental guidelines. At the same time, knowledgeable behavioral specialists should be forthright in letting organizational leaders know that a corporate philosophy consistent with the positive structure of behavioral methods is a requirement for long-term success. ■

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