

# Corrective Actions

## Strengthening Safety by Addressing At-Risk Behavior

By Christopher A. Goulart

**D**ecisions about whether to punish, discipline, hold accountable, coach or give feedback have stymied managers, leaders and safety professionals for decades. The challenge is providing appropriate and meaningful consequences while being fair

and ensuring that the interactions generate the most desirable outcomes for both the employee and the organization.

Using punishment and blame for mistakes and errors at the expense of coaching and feedback can create many problems for an organization ranging from loss of morale to employee hostility toward management and reluctance to abide by safe work procedures.

Further, organizations that dole out punishment indiscriminately undermine their integrity. This consequence can result when employers punish workers for actions that are not their fault or for issues arising from conditions beyond their control. Thus, taking pre-

cautions to avoid any misapplication of punishment or blame should be a cultural norm for all employers.

Ultimately, the goal is to provide appropriate and meaningful consequences while being fair and ensuring that interactions generate the most desirable outcomes for both the employee and the organization.

### Proximal vs. Absolute Safety Goals

Proximal goals of providing negative consequences are to correct error, change behavior or to avoid employees violating acceptable practices. However, the absolute goal is to help create an organization in which performance is optimized, risk is reduced, and injuries and incidents are less likely to occur.

The two goals are not always aligned, and conflicts arise when objectives are compromised by actions to attain the proximal goal. Thus, if individuals are held accountable or punished for actions in situations where a learning opportunity would otherwise exist, they will not change their behavior other than to avoid the activity for which they were penalized. This will also undermine the absolute goal by reducing employee participation in organizational safety processes, including efforts to identify the true sources of at-risk acts and evaluate systemic causes of risk.

To improve safety and reduce risk, organizations should note that each action that has negative consequences (punishment, discipline, accountability, blame, feedback and coaching) can be used beneficially. However, each must be used in the right way at the right time.

### Punishment: A Last Resort

Punishment is best used when employees intentionally violate a safety rule. In these situations, termination may be the only option. If an employee intentionally refuses to follow established practices despite knowing safe work practices, which consequently creates excessive risk or harm, then

#### IN BRIEF

- **To optimize performance and promote a culture of safety excellence, safety professionals must provide feedback, assign accountability, discipline, coach or punish employees.**
- **Application of these approaches must be considered carefully; each has potential perils and benefits to both the organization and its employees.**
- **By understanding the available options, as well as when they should be used and their implications, safety professionals will be better equipped to determine the best course of action for addressing at-risk behavior and promoting a culture of safety excellence across their organizations.**

**Christopher A. Goulart, CSP, ARM, CSHM**, is a senior safety consultant with Aon in Denver, CO. He assists clients with activities relating to safety leadership, safety culture, behavior-based safety and safety management systems. Goulart holds an M.S. in Safety Management from Oakland University, and has authored articles on topics such as practicing safety with integrity, behavior-based safety in agriculture and risk assessment. He is a professional member of ASSE's Colorado Chapter, a member of the Consultants Practice Specialty and a member of the Technical Publications Advisory Committee.



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punishment is appropriate and probably necessary. However, only under this narrow set of circumstances can an organization be confident that punishment is appropriate.

In most circumstances, safety professionals should first evaluate the alternatives to punishment. Applying punishment for an oversight or honest mistake is never helpful, so the organization must meticulously determine whether punishment is appropriate. Indeed, most people learn best from their mistakes. This forms the cornerstone of many management and leadership philosophies, and helps foster a foundation of trust between employee and manager (Seijts, 2013).

### **Problem Solving Is Key to Effective Discipline**

Discipline is another form of negative reinforcement yet does not present the worst-case scenario typically associated with punishment. Employees often have the opportunity to learn and grow from a negative event when they are disciplined.

Discipline is distinct from punishment, which has severe consequences for employees without a pathway for behavioral improvement. Indeed, when employees feel punished, any changes in behavior may not be those expected. Punished employees generally attempt to remove themselves from any situation that relates to the one for which they were punished. This avoidance behavior is not generally seen in discipline when employees are provided with a road map for future improvement.

Agnew and Snyder (2008) identify five shortcomings of using punishment: 1) no sustained behavioral change; 2) cessation of at-risk behavior not replaced by safe behavior; 3) difficult requirement of catching perpetrator in the act or reduced effectiveness; 4) does not work with lone workers and impossible to administer; and 5) overuse of

punishment can make it the default response for all failures or mistakes.

In contrast to punishment, discipline, which also focuses on serious transgressions involving inappropriate behavior, is primarily intended to help employees learn and chart a new course of action.

For discipline to be effective, the discipliner must ensure that the indiscretion is fully discussed and understood with an eye toward helping the transgressor fully understand the situation so s/he can apply better decision making going forward. This contrasts with the perception that discipline is synonymous with punishment.

Therefore, it is critical that employees have a productive interaction and understand how their actions or behaviors must change. In line with the goal of optimizing performance and engaging employees, problem solving and providing a productive path forward is the most important aspect of workplace discipline. Without it, discipline becomes more akin to punishment.

In applying discipline, Stricoff (2013) notes that mixed messages must be avoided; the attribution of fault must be done objectively; expectations of performance going forward must be clear and realistic; and the scope of focus must be narrow (Stricoff, 2013).

These principles form the basis of constructive discipline where an employee understands what led to the admonishment and has a clear course of action to meet expectations.

### **No Place for Blame in Safety Excellence**

While blame is certainly implied when a person experiences punishment, it can be used in situations in which punishment and discipline are not considered. One example of such a situation is when an employee sustains an injury and is essentially blamed for being the cause of what happened.

**Table 1**

## Responding to At-Risk Employee Behavior

Response	Time for use	Anticipated outcome
Punishment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•When an employee violates a known rule with the intent of putting him/herself or others in harm's way (Butterfield, Treviño, Wade, et al., 2005).</li> <li>•When exposure is serious and there is intent to not follow directives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Removal of employee from the organization.</li> </ul>
Discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Employee violates a rule without intention or is unaware of being at risk.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Employee may find experience punitive, but can learn from it and have a plan to avoid at-risk behavior in the future (Grote, 2006).</li> </ul>
Blame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Blame is never helpful in any setting.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•No systemic review of incident; complete removal of offending party.</li> </ul>
Accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Limited use in performance management.</li> <li>•Best when the discussion centers on giving an account of what transpired.</li> <li>•With shared accountability for safety, discussions of failures are held in a blame-free environment (Dekker, 2012).</li> <li>•Make sure those responsible for accomplishing a task safely have the tools, support and motivation to do so (Dekker, 2012).</li> <li>•If failures occur, have all responsible parties provide an account of what happened.</li> <li>•When individuals are called to account, they are asked to self-report a failure or shortcoming.</li> <li>•There can be similar connotations as in discipline, but discussions are proactive rather than reactive in organizations practicing shared accountability.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•When accountability is managed appropriately, employees understand their area of responsibility for safety.</li> <li>•If viewed as a collaboration among all members of the organization and one fails, the accountability may feel like discipline, but countermeasures look at the problem systemically and not on an individual level (Dekker, 2012).</li> </ul>
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Use at all times with all employees under all circumstances (Daniels, 2000).</li> <li>•A powerful social reinforcer to encourage safe behaviors and coach at-risk behaviors.</li> <li>•Must be given in a specific and directed manner (Daniels, 2000).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Employees tend to be more successful and organizations tend to flourish in feedback-rich environments (Daniels, 2000).</li> <li>•When feedback is routine, communication standards are higher, employees are more engaged, and leadership can provide a vision that translates seamlessly into actions.</li> </ul>
Coaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Coaching is feedback provided when at-risk behavior is observed.</li> <li>•At-risk behaviors occur regularly in most workplaces.</li> <li>•In safety models that foster continuous improvement, coaching all at-risk behaviors is crucial (Daniels, 2000).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Often done on a peer-to-peer basis.</li> <li>•Should never be associated with any type of formal discipline.</li> <li>•Provides chance for employees to dialogue about at-risk behaviors and problem solving so they can commit to work safely in the future.</li> </ul>

Assigning blame occurs when a supervisor, manager or a peer believes the employee is likely at fault for some transgression. The situation can be complicated if the person assigning blame determines the causality.

Regardless of the circumstances, blame is never a helpful aspect of a safety process. In assigning blame, organizations fail to evaluate true causes of risk and injuries. When a culture of blame is present, employees do not engage in the workplace, scapegoating is common and there is no positive momentum (Dekker, 2102). To avoid these issues, safety professionals should work to remove blame from any meaningful approaches to improving safety.

### Use Accountability to Promote Safety

When individuals take responsibility for their actions and decisions, they are "owning the situation" and taking proactive steps to create a culture of shared responsibility. Accountability is not a negative state, nor is being held accountable a form of discipline.

However, being accountable for a specific task does not necessarily mean a person will do it;

rather, it implies the person must make sure it gets accomplished. As Eblin (2011) observes, "If you're accountable, you answer for it. If you're responsible, you do it." Thus, an individual may be accountable for the action of others if it is his/her responsibility to make sure the action gets done.

Optimally, accountability should be a proactive means of managing performance. Assigning individuals responsibility and asking them to account for their actions can be initiated in a positive manner. In many forward-thinking entities, accountability is used to recognize accomplishments rather than to point out failings.

With regard to worker safety, an organization should strive to achieve shared accountability for performance. Safety performance expectations and responsibilities for employees, supervisors, managers and senior leaders must be aligned so that all levels of the organization can participate in controlling risk and reducing injuries. Shared accountability implies that if a failure occurs in the safety system, it is not the fault of any individual; instead, it repre-

sents an opportunity for the entire organization to work collaboratively to drive ongoing improvement.

In many cases, individuals held accountable are disciplined for failing to achieve an objective or avoid a negative outcome (Dekker, 2012). Even so, it might prove more productive to describe the interaction as calling someone to account rather than holding someone accountable. Allowing individuals to give an account of actions opens the door to problem solving and can transition the encounter from a disciplinary event to a coaching or feedback event. This approach is more proactive and can be developmentally important for both the individual and the organization.

### Effective Ways to Provide Feedback

Appreciative feedback reinforces a behavior and plays a vital role to ensure that it continues. Alternatively, constructive feedback is used to change behavior. Coaching, a form of constructive feedback, generally yields the best results in changing behavior.

Meanwhile, appreciative feedback is a powerful motivator. When desired actions result in appreciative feedback, they are likely to be repeated. Several factors help make feedback a powerful form of reinforcement:

- It can be given to anyone. Peer-to-peer feedback can be as powerful as supervisor-to-employee feedback.
- It can be specific to the desired behavior. Thus, the message to the employee is clear.
- It represents a meaningful consequence. Feedback can be given immediately after a positive behavior so it is certain to be repeated.
- Feedback reinforces behavior, strengthens relationships and improves morale.
- Feedback allows standards of behavior to be established and maintained.

Appreciative feedback not only helps sustain behavior, it can motivate employees to exceed expectations. Safety professionals strive to develop employees who view workplace safety personally, take ownership for safety and are interested in the safety and well-being of coworkers. Appreciative feedback is a valuable tool for accomplishing those results.

### Coach to Achieve Better Outcomes

For the safety professional, coaching is a valuable tool to change or influence undesired or at-risk behavior. To be effective, coaching should be conducted in a respectful and understanding manner, and include a commitment by the employee to work more safely or appropriately in the future.

One key advantage of coaching is that it can be an alternative to discipline if at-risk behaviors result from employees making mistakes or engaging in poor behaviors that have been reinforced over time. It also provides a forward-looking approach to changing behavior when an employee sustains an injury or when a knowledge gap exists and employees were unaware of required work practices.

Often, the need for coaching arises when an at-risk behavior is observed. In these situations, coaching can begin the process of positive behavior change. It involves employees in discussing both their current and expected performance.

In a coaching session, the person observing the at-risk behavior has a focused discussion with the employee, explains what is unacceptable and provides direction on the appropriate behavior. The coaching session should conclude with the employee committing to be safe and to work correctly.

Achieving positive behavior change requires that the worker fully understand the process involved and that the employer follow that process. Typically, coaching is the first step in a longer process that includes providing positive feedback when safe behavior is observed.

Following are several keys to make coaching sessions more productive.

#### *Coach in a Respectful Manner*

Individuals are more open to hearing and internalizing messages, even negative ones, if the messages are communicated in a respectful manner. Speak in an affirming tone; avoid personal verbal assaults; discuss the act or behavior, not the individual, and coach in private whenever possible.

#### *Ask, Don't Tell*

No adult likes to be told what to do or what s/he may have done wrong. Individuals are much more open to a conversation if first asked for their thoughts and perspectives rather than simply being told what they did wrong.

#### *Allow for Personality Characteristics*

When coached, some individuals become defensive or withdrawn. Successful coaches allow people to respond in a way that is natural to them, as the coaching session maintains its focus.

#### *Include Problem Solving*

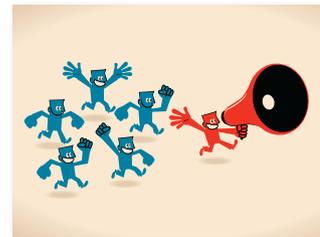
Work with individuals to find viable solutions so they apply feedback proactively into their work routine. This engages them in the safety process and enables them to take ownership for the outcome and solution. Problem solving can be as simple as asking employees what they need to work safely. Collaborate on a strategy to remove barriers to safety and workers will be more likely to follow it and encourage others to do the same.

#### *Avoid Bias*

Try to see the behavior from the employee's perspective. If an individual has difficulty with certain tasks and is observed taking a risk, one might assume s/he has not learned safe work procedures. However, it is possible the person may know how to work safely, but does not do so to save time and effort. Keep biases in check so they do not undermine the coaching objectives.

#### *Conduct Coaching in Comfortable, Safe Locations*

Choose a location that puts the employee at ease. People tend to be uncomfortable with discussions that focus on their mistakes and corrective actions. Try coaching in private, in the employee's work area, break room or training area. When possible,



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avoid coaching in your office, the employee's supervisor's office or other areas where the employee may feel insecure.

### **Obtain a Commitment for Safe Practices**

When a coaching session concludes, it must include a request for the individual to work safely in the future. In formal coaching sessions, one might document this commitment through a safety agreement or contract. This is easier to accomplish if the person coached was treated respectfully and was asked about how to work safely. It can be as simple as asking the employee to follow safe practices in the future or as complex as verifying that the employee knows all the steps to lockout/tagout and obtaining a verbal agreement that the employee will follow the procedures.

### **Motivate Employees to Be Safe**

In 2012, U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) adopted a no-fault self-reporting process called the Air Traffic Safety Action Program (FAA, 2012). This program encouraged the reporting of incidents, near-hits and other events that could lead to airplane crashes. The program, which promised that if actions were reported within a certain time frame no punitive actions would be taken, helped increase the reporting of at-risk events by more than 50% and created a strong safety culture.

When employees understand responsibilities and believe in a shared accountability, they are more likely and willing to become personally involved in safety efforts and, equally important, to take them seriously. On the other hand, when punishment, discipline and blame become normative values, organizations are inhibited from achieving excellence.

Employees who are working diligently to avoid failure are essentially not working to accomplish anything. No individual or company has been successful solely by excelling at avoiding failure. Further, the misapplication of discipline or blame can be punishing for employees. Using punishment to direct employee behavior can ultimately be self-defeating (Table 1, p. 48).

The control of errors and the management of risk are critically important concepts for organizations. However, the most effective way to control errors is to learn from them, not punish them (Prince, 2015). Further, when an error receives punishment, disengaged employees may withdraw and experience the extinguishing of valued traits, such as creativity, entrepreneurialism and collaboration. Absent the ability to make errors and learn from them, even within the context of safety, the road to improvement and the achievement of safety excellence is impossible. Positive feedback and reinforcement can be a foundation to improving workplace safety and creating a more accountable workforce.

### **Conclusion**

Regardless of whether safety professionals are directly involved in the various corrective measures their organizations take to address at-risk

behaviors, they need to recognize the implications and results of these activities. Any steps taken to reinforce safe behavior and correct at-risk actions by employees must be carefully considered before they are used. The use of an inappropriate consequence can have harmful effects to the organization and its overall culture.

Safety professionals should engage with operational executives and supervisory personnel to assess and track how their organizations address unsafe behaviors at all levels. They should determine whether changes are needed, not only in how supervisors interact with workers, but also in their organizations' overall culture.

By understanding the options available, when each should be used and the outcome, for both individual employees and their organization's culture, safety professionals, operations managers and supervisory personnel will be better equipped to determine the best course of action for advancing workplace safety and addressing risky actions.

This will help foster a collaborative culture that will go a long way to promote safety across organizations. A true model of safety excellence entails the employer and employees jointly achieving profoundly positive outcomes facilitated by the best practices for correcting individual mistakes. **PS**

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