

"Behavior Based Safety" Programs

"Behavior based safety" refers to a wide range of programs which focus almost entirely on changing the behavior of workers to prevent occupational injuries and illnesses. The programs are based on the false claim that the overwhelming majority of injuries and illnesses are the result of "unsafe acts" by workers.

The first step is listing problem worker behaviors. Next inspectors are selected to monitor the work activities of workers. Most programs use hourly workers as inspectors to monitor their fellow workers, undermining union solidarity.

A BAD OLD IDEA

Although "behavior based safety" is being promoted as a modern concept, it originated with the work of H. W. Heinrich at the Travelers Insurance Company in the 1930's and 1940's. Heinrich conducted "research" on thousands of insurance and injury/illness reports written by corporate supervisors. The reports blamed the workers, so-called "man failure" in the jargon of the time, for 73% of the accidents. Heinrich revised this figure upwards to conclude that 88% of industrial accidents could be blamed on workers.

Heinrich claimed that accidents result from "undesirable traits of character ... passed along through inheritance" and the fault of workers who commit unsafe acts. Management-side safety professionals have based their work on Heinrich's faulty theories ever since.

WHY IT'S POPULAR

Managers like behavior based safety because it shifts responsibility for health and safety to the workers and does not require significant change in the work process, engineering design or management system.

Companies selling behavior based safety programs claim the number of lost workdays drops with these programs. Lost time accidents are known to be the least reliable measures in determining the effectiveness of a health and safety program since lost workdays rates are mostly dependent on a company's ability to put injured workers on light duty.

Proponents also claim behavior based safety is less expensive because management can use current workers to identify hazards rather than employing health and safety professionals. This claim leaves out the cost of training workers to recognize hazards.

THE REAL CAUSES

Injuries and illnesses are caused by exposure to hazards. Hazards include any aspect of technology or activity that produces risk. Injuries and illnesses occur when our bodies come in contact with levels of energy or toxic material that are greater than the threshold which our bodies can stand. The greater the amount of energy or the more toxic the material, the greater the severity of injury or illness. The probability of incidents is mostly

dependent on the duration and frequency of exposure.

In 1950 the National Safety Council began describing a hierarchy of controls to apply when reducing and eliminating hazards. The hierarchy is accepted worldwide. Proponents of behavior based safety programs don't support it because it contradicts their theory that 95% of accidents are caused by unsafe acts of workers.

Behavior based programs implement the least effective, lowest level controls, rather than controlling hazards at the source. A consumer example illustrates the vital role of safety standards. Manufacturers bitterly fought passage of the Refrigerator Safety Act which eliminated locks on refrigerator doors and established a very low amount of force needed to push open the door from the inside. Manufacturers claimed parents were the problem. The act passed. No child has died in a refrigerator designed since enactment of the standards.

FEAR & LOATHING AT WORK

Behavior based safety does not result in any real cost advantage because they focus on the actions of the worker, where change is most costly and the benefit is the least. Eliminating toxic material or installing proper ventilation, for example, is likely to cost less and be more effective than purchasing respirators for all workers, doing respirator fit testing, worker training, and respirator maintenance, medical exams, compliance inspections and routine environmental monitoring.

Behavior based safety programs drive problems underground, inject fear into the workplace and discourage workers from reporting illnesses and injuries. Workers know they will be blamed when they get hurt because management claims unsafe acts cause all injuries. The programs undermine union solidarity by forcing workers to monitor each other.

To fulfill the promise of a safe and healthy workplace for every American, it is the design of work process and work product that must be changed to prevent problems.

When carefully analyzed, behavior based safety programs do not deliver on any of their promises. They do not improve safety, in fact they increase the likelihood of workers being exposed to serious health and safety hazards by focusing on the least reliable methods for protecting workers. They do not save money. Worst of all, they are based on an assumption the workplace doesn't need to be redesigned and that as workers we don't care about our own safety and need to be bribed or bullied to work safely.

This SEMCOSH factsheet is based in part on Jim Howe's report *A Union Critique of Behavior Based Safety*. Howe is Assistant Director of the UAW Health and Safety Department. Copies of his report are available from: UAW Health & Safety Department 8000 E. Jefferson, Detroit, MI 48214.