

## PSYCHOLOGY of *safety*



By Scott Geller

### People-Based Safety™ in action: 5 distinctions from behavior-based safety

In a Total Safety Culture, people *Act* to prevent injuries, *Coach* one another to identify barriers to safe acts and provide constructive behavior-based feedback, *Think* in ways that activate and support safe behavior, and focus and scan to *See* hazards. These four essentials of People-Based Safety™ — called “ACTS” — provide knowledge, skills, and tools to fully address the human dynamics of industrial safety.

It's fitting the essentials of People-Based Safety™ (PBS) spell “ACTS,” because safety depends upon the actions of people.

People-Based Safety™ is no substitute for behavior-based safety (BBS), but rather extends BBS for greater impact.

PBS targets attitudes, perceptions and thoughts to improve these “person states,” leading to changes in critical behaviors. If behavior or actions don't improve — there is no bottom line benefit to safety.

People-Based Safety™ is no substitute for behavior-based safety (BBS), but rather extends BBS for greater impact. PBS teaches ways to self-coach and increase self-accountability for safety. Let's look at five components of People-Based Safety™, all relating to actions, distinguishing PBS from BBS.

#### 1 Self-directed behavior

A BBS observation-and-feedback

process initiates and sustains other-directed behavior. Workers increase safe behavior and decrease at-risk behavior because others — their peers — hold them accountable.

But people often work alone, and so they need to coach themselves. This requires self-accountability and *self-directed* behavior. People need to believe in and own the safe way of doing things.

Self-direction requires internal justification for the right behavior. This happens when external consequences supporting an action are not sufficient to totally justify the behavior. Too often people choose safe over at-risk acts only because they want to obtain a reward or avoid a penalty. These programs often get the desired behavior — while this accountability system is in place. But what happens when the external rewards or penalties are unavailable?

The key is not to over-justify safe behavior with large incentives and severe threats, but to provide education, training, and experience to help people develop a sense of personal control over preventing injuries. This includes understanding how habits can be undesirable when it comes to safety.

#### 2 Mental awareness

Developing safe habits is a key objective of BBS. Daily repetition of an observation-and-feedback process builds “habit strength” eventually resulting in the development of safe habits. This is good, but not ideal. Habits occur without mental awareness or thoughts, as when you buckle a vehicle safety belt without thinking about it.



**Safety depends upon the actions of people. If behavior or actions don't improve — there is no bottom line benefit to safety.**

But what if your buckle-up behavior is so automatic you don't notice a passenger in your vehicle is not buckled up? You could miss an opportunity to actively care for the safety of others. And you miss an opportunity to develop self-talk or thinking that supports self-direction and self-accountability.

I hope you agree self-directed or mindful behavior is more desirable than mindless, habitual behavior.

#### 3 Personal choice

I've heard many BBS trainers, consultants and students claim that certain environmental cues “trigger” safe behavior. This implies that stimuli cause safety-related behavior to occur. Not true.

Some “triggers” cause involuntary behavior. The flashing blue lights of a state

## Essentials of People-Based Safety™

**Act** to prevent injuries.

**Coach** one another to identify barriers to safe acts and provide constructive behavior-based feedback.

**Think** in ways that activate and support safe behavior.

Focus and scan to **See** hazards.

These four essentials of People-Based Safety™ — called “ACTS” — provide knowledge, skills and tools to fully address the human dynamics of workplace safety.

trooper elicit certain emotional reactions. But drivers choose to slow down and pull over. Similarly, traffic lights do not trigger or cause intersection behavior, although they may cause an emotional rush following a driver’s decision to speed through an intersection as the light changes from yellow to red.

Bottom line: There is a space between the stimulus (or activator) and voluntary

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behavior. Activators provide direction, but it’s up to you whether to follow the direction. Your choice is largely determined by how you perceive consequences and their importance to you. What positive consequence do you expect to gain and/or what negative consequence do you expect to avoid?

Yes, this is the standard ABC (Activator – Behavior – Consequence) Principle of BBS, but the PBS view of it takes into account one’s beliefs, perceptions, and attitude.

## 4 Attitudes & perceptions

“Positive reinforcement” is overused and abused by trainers and students of BBS. A consequence is a reinforcer (positive or negative) only if it increases the behavior it follows.

Attitudes and perceptions determine the motivating potential of a reward or penalty. Trainers and students of PBS realize the reinforcing power of a consequence is in the eye of the beholder. The meaning of a “safety trinket” to an individual determines whether such a consequence is viewed as positive, negative, or neutral and could motivate behavior (see my discussion of “safety mementos” in the February 2005 issue of *ISHN*).

It’s usually impossible to determine whether delivering a consequence actually influences the behavior it follows. Thus, the loose use of “positive reinforcement” among BBS consultants and students is risky and often inappropriate. PBS does not make this mistake. “Positive reinforcement” is not used in PBS, and the impact of positive consequences on feelings or person states is entertained and appreciated.

## 5 Feeling states

In PBS, positive consequences are considered “rewards,” and negative consequences are “penalties.” If these consequences don’t impact overt behavior, they will at least influence feeling states, which is important in PBS. With PBS, rewards increase self-esteem and perceptions of personal competence and control, as well as improve behavior. Research shows these feelings increase people’s willingness to actively care for the safety and health of others. Thus, PBS applications of the ABC Principle are directed to both external behaviors and internal person states.

Next month I’ll continue to explain how PBS refines and extends standard BBS concepts for greater and broader impact on the human dynamics of occupational safety. More specifically, I’ll

point out advantages of a PBS approach to safety coaching over BBS coaching.

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Note: For information on Dr. Geller’s new book on People-Based Safety™, as well as five video/CD programs, accompanied by workbooks and leader guides produced by Coastal Training Technologies Corporation, visit [www.people-based-safety.com](http://www.people-based-safety.com); email: [pbs@coastal.com](mailto:pbs@coastal.com); or call (800) 516-1617.

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