



HARKERA

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Is safety going in the wrong direction?

The main objective of any safety professional is quite clear: Helping to prevent injuries among the workforce. Actually *achieving* this objective isn't quite as simple because we're not simple predictable machines. We act in accordance with our experiences and our local environment. Over the last couple of decades psychologists and consultants have been inching closer and closer to overly simplistic strategies for safety. They appear in the form of blanket initiatives and they're beginning to push us in the wrong direction. At their best these initiatives are superficial safety, and at their worst they are dangerous and destructive. Although there are many variations, lately our experiences have exposed us to some repeat offenders.



1. Safety Observations
2. Reporting Near Misses, Minor Injuries, & Hazards
3. Unfounded rules
4. Executive Visits

Safety Observations

This initiative is at least founded in science and research and has origins in Behavior Based Safety (BBS). Behavior Based Safety refers to the use of basic behavioral principles to help improve safety performance. The general idea is that observing people at work and providing feedback on their performance will prevent future injuries. Receiving honest feedback where there was once none should shift behavior in a more positive and safer direction, unfortunately many of these rolled out schemes turned into 'box ticking' exercises rather than creating a safer place for people to work.

As of late, the safety performance of organizations relying heavily on safety observation processes has plateaued. Executives who once believed that they were performing at the highest level of safety are finding themselves at the center of incidents involving major injuries or fatalities. As a result, safety leaders are pushing harder, demanding an even bigger focus on observations and hoping the approach will take them to the pinnacle of safety. The reality is that even at its best, safety observations relying on the workforce to tick a box indicating a safety observation is complete will only help to a point. The observation (and attempted correction) of an undesired behavior in the moment can only address a relatively small part of the complex environments that we work in.

Reporting Near Misses, Minor Injuries, & Hazards

Another way organizations try to affect safety performance is to focus on the relentless chasing of near misses and minor injuries, believing that most harm is preventable if those at risk report when things are wrong. These programs drum into people the need to report near misses and hazards for *everything* that looks unsafe. They drum into people the need to report the injuries that they sustain, no matter how small. They drum into people the need to do something different without seeking to understand the *impact* of different.



Quite often while beating these drums, it's made perfectly clear that no injury or incident is acceptable. Zero Harm, Target Zero, Zero Accidents; all these targets ideas and slogans are at odds with the message rolled out via near miss reporting. There is a direct contradiction between asking an at-risk worker to stop in the middle of a task and confess that something is wrong before an injury occurs while at the same time stating that no incidents are acceptable. Near miss reporting does one thing well; it provides superficial comfort. The true impact on safety, however has been debatable and a recent study has proven that there is not as strong a link between near misses and serious incidents as we once thought. (BST, New Findings on Serious Injuries and Fatalities)

Unfounded Rules

There seems to be a belief that if we make everyone stick to simple, blanket, dictated rules that safety culture will improve and everyone will be safer. Organizations compound this by judging overall performance on compliance to rules. All employee vehicles parked in reverse is not reflective of an organizations safety culture. At the least, these types of initiatives can be viewed as patronizing. However, they are also distracting and dangerous, masking the real threats that are now going unnoticed because we're distracted with stair monitors.

These schemes do not make the workplace environment safer, however they're typically popular because of their relative ease to police. We're not suggesting we shouldn't *care* about minor injuries; we should care about avoiding all injury. We're suggesting that a fixation on a simplified view of safety is taking attention away from what matters most. In its current form, this approach can actually make the future less safe.

Executive Visits

For some organizations, the idea that "leadership" become directly involved with safety has gone to a level of unintended proportions. Most company executives, directors, or high-ranking officials who make a visit to a worksite are doing it with the best of intentions, (well, some are doing it to fulfil a KPI or bonusable target) but we've seen the outcome of these visits and it's typically not what the executive hoped for. People are resentful and safety is no better off than before the visit. Over 90% of the people polled in our opinion surveys dislike executive visits. They are seen as an unwanted distraction, punishing to the site managers and laughable to the workers. They are performed in a mock environment typically comprising a tick box walk around resulting in a list of unwelcome actions and aversion all around.

We're not saying it's inappropriate for an executive or manager to be interested in what is happening at the site level. We *are* saying that correcting the safety behavior of someone on a random day out of the year will not improve safety. The leaders with the most influence over the workforce are the leaders who are physically present within the work environment on a regular basis, not the men and women making their presence felt one or two times a year. So what should we do?

Safety via Science

There are plenty of simple safety initiatives. They take various forms and some are very reasonable attempts at helping with safety. It is wise to be wary of a strategy that attempts to take the complex subject of human behavior and make it appear simple. There is no quick fix to safety, no simple initiative to get you there.

If you find that there are members of your workforce taking risks it's the best information you could hope to receive because you can't possibly influence anyone without first understanding them. Behavior is influenced by three things: genetics, past history, and local environment. The local environment is the only one of those things that we have any control over. The people with the most influence of the local environment of the workforce are the leaders



working alongside them. It's in an organizations best interest to educate those leaders so that they have the tools they need to address any safety concerns and prevent future injuries.

Many companies have achieved success by learning and applying behavioral science to their business. Practicing the science helps create an environment that supports desired behaviors and discourages undesired behaviors. You can't copy or simplify the science, but you can learn it yourself and apply it to your specific needs. A relentless and purposeful strategy can make a real difference.

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