



August 23, 2022

You've updated your safety training, clarified safety protocols, improved safety gear, and actively worked to eliminate barriers, but you're still observing at-risk behaviors. Why is that? You've worked hard to ensure that you have an environment that is setting people up for safe performance. So should you go back to the drawing board and look for a way to do safety differently? Not necessarily.

Maybe you don't need to do safety differently—you need to do *leadership* differently.

GETTING BEHAVIOR GOING

There are several components that make up an effective safety system¹. There must be pertinent, accessible, and understandable information, clear expectations, prompts, and task aids. Workers must have easy access to reliable equipment and tools. The work environment must be free of environmental hazards and employees must be able to physically demonstrate the task in the situations under which the task is expected to be performed. Processes must be clear, understood, and designed to fit the desired safety expectations. For example, if the safest option to complete a task takes an exemplary employee 15 minutes but workers are given only 10 minutes to complete the respective task, they are set up for failure.

**Safety is a
subset of
leadership.**

It is the responsibility of leadership to ensure that safety systems set employees up for success. Training only builds awareness of safe behaviors and even the best policies, procedures, and resources will not provide on-the-job support for those using them. Decades of research in Applied Behavioral Science (ABS) makes clear that lasting behavior change only comes through ongoing leadership support, mentoring and coaching people to build habits by seeing the personal value of the behaviors trained.

YOU HAVE A LEADERSHIP PROBLEM, NOT A SAFETY PROBLEM

Good leaders not only set people up for success, but they actively, strategically, and consistently support others. People demonstrate desired (or undesired) behaviors because it works for them. There is some motivating consequence that turns behavior in to habits. It might not be the ideal way of doing things or even comply with company standards, but behavior is occurring because there is an outcome that is positive and strong enough to reinforce a reoccurrence of the behavior. Are your leaders positively reinforcing the safe desired behaviors and helping shape at-risk (undesired) behaviors into safe replacements?



Observe what your employees gravitate toward, where they spend most of their time, and what seems to motivate them. Do they tend toward the faster option? Are they taking short cuts and opting for the easier path? Effective Leaders ask open-ended questions to understand what workers need and identify barriers standing in the way of safe behaviors. This information can help you link safe desired behaviors with the things that personally matter to the individual. Offer tips and find ways to ensure the safe option is the most efficient, most recognized, and, overall, the most reinforcing

option. Leadership involves helping your direct reports become good observers of their behavior and the impact of their behavior, making the connection between safe behaviors and what is important to them personally.

Effective training systems, policies, procedures, and safety resources are all critical to workplace safety. However, if you are focusing solely on training and other administrative controls without ongoing leadership support, you don't have a safety problem—you have a leadership problem. Leadership expands beyond training, policies, and resources. Safety is a subset of leadership. A safe workplace culture comes from building safe habits, and habits are built through ongoing feedback. By prioritizing leadership systems, you are prioritizing the ongoing and sustainable safety improvements that come from having leadership systems.

¹Martinez-Onstott, B., Wilder, D., & Sigurdsson, S. (2016) Identifying the Variables Contributing to At-Risk Performance: Initial Evaluation of the Performance Diagnostic Checklist–Safety (PDC-Safety), *Journal of Organizational Behavior Management*, 36:1, 80-93, DOI: 10.1080/01608061.2016.1152209

About the Author

Dr. Nic Weatherly is the GM of US and EMEA Operations of SCCi. He is an executive, field coach, and Behavioral Science expert with over 15 years of success leading progressive people operations and culture change. Dr. Weatherly's expertise is in maximizing safety and leadership performance by monitoring KPIs, implementing science-based coaching practices, and establishing results-focused objectives and timetables using an individualized, collaborative, and sustainable approach. He has given or contributed to nearly 100 scholarly presentations and workshops worldwide on training, safety, and leadership topics, co-authored the book *Deliberate Coaching*, and has been published in numerous peer-reviewed scientific publications. Dr. Weatherly has a Master's and Ph.D. in behavior analysis from Western Michigan University and is a Board Certified Behaviour Analyst-Doctoral.



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