

Training and Leadership

Breaking the Cycle of Risky Behavior

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"I don't know what happened. I've been doing this job for 20 years and I've never gotten hurt."

If I had a dollar for every time an injured employee told me that, I'd be a rich man. The truth is, we almost always get hurt because of something that doesn't happen very often. Things don't break very often. Cars don't lose their brakes very often. Other people don't drop heavy things on us very often. But they do occasionally.



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Safety Theories

Traditional safety programs try to eliminate, or at least drastically reduce, the potential for injury through a combination of training, engineering controls and administrative measures.

Behavior-based safety takes matters a step further by observing workers and telling them when they're doing things wrong or right. Over time, the theory goes, people will develop "habit strength", for example, by buckling their seat belt without thinking about it any time they get into a car.

[Editor's Note: *For more on behavior-based safety, see Michael Topf's four-part series that ran in the SafetyXChange Training & Leadership Insider on June 9, 16, 23 and 30.*]

Where Things Go Wrong

These techniques are all well and good as long as we don't introduce any other factors, like being tired, frustrated or in a hurry. But all bets are off when these factors enter the picture.

A person who's normally a safe driver becomes a different person once he sleeps through the alarm and gets to running late for work. Suddenly the good habits disappear and get replaced by tailgating, cursing and speeding. It's when people get into such states that accidents are most likely to happen.

The same thing happens in the workplace. When you introduce rushing into the work environment, say because the machine is down and you haven't been able to make parts all morning and the customers are waiting, we begin to work outside of traditional or behavior-based safety program guidance. Good habits and training go out the window and risky behavior takes over.

Advanced Safety Awareness

Rushing, fatigue, frustration, complacency, anger, etc. All of these emotions and states can contribute to the making of critical mistakes. Advanced safety awareness recognizes this and addresses the problem.

Wouldn't it be better if we could learn to trigger on the state? For instance, once we recognize that we're rushing or getting frustrated, we would step back, take a deep breath and say to ourselves, "Hey, if I keep this up, I'm going to hurt myself." This is what advanced safety awareness is all about.