

## **Inspiring Behavioral Change**

**Ronald D. Bowles  
Director of Operations  
Strategic Safety Associates, Inc.  
Portland, Oregon**

### **Introduction**

Safety, at its highest level, positively changes skills, habits, attitudes, decisions, and actions at work and at home. In today's safety environment, almost everyone acknowledges both the importance of changing behavior and just how difficult this can be to accomplish. Many currently think of the alternatives for changing behavior as limited to focusing on observation and feedback, improving the safety culture, and/or incenting safety performance. These alternatives do not have to be exclusive of each other; in fact, they are often complementary. But even if they are taken all together, we may be neglecting a critical tool: inspiring people to make changes for themselves. It is time that safety advocates recognize this deficiency and strive to become skilled at inspiring behavioral change.

This paper presents two positive strategies to simultaneously improve safe behaviors, change the safety culture, increase involvement and buy-in, and prevent injuries.

### **Limitations to Conventional Approaches for Changing Behavior**

In *Behavior Change Versus Culture Change: Divergent Approaches to Managing Workplace Safety*, David M. DeJoy does an excellent job of contrasting the strengths and weaknesses of a system focused on behavioral change as opposed to one that emphasizes cultural change. DeJoy asserts that these approaches are "largely complementary" and that the strengths of one match up well with the weaknesses of the other. While our worldwide experience with hundreds of companies supports much of DeJoy's conclusions, we have encountered several other key limitations of these approaches. This paper will summarize those limitations and introduce additional, corresponding approaches that address those limitations. We will also briefly discuss the limitations of incentives in order to help us clarify the value of other alternatives.

*What are a few of the limitations to using post observation feedback as a consequence in order to shape behavior?*

## 1. Frequency of feedback

For over 20 years we have worked both domestically and internationally with organizations striving to improve their safety performance. Many of these companies have implemented a behavioral observation process, and a high percentage of these have had significant success as a result. Still, almost all of these clients report that one limit to the effectiveness of their process is the low ratio of observations for each employee. In other words, observations are too few and far between. Even if the critical behaviors are pinpointed and clearly defined, the quality of the observations are excellent, and the total number of observations is high, their effectiveness is limited if the average employee is only observed a few times a month. This frequency is too limited to extinguish a behavior that may have inherently self-reinforcing consequences, such as a shortcut that saves the worker significant time.

To put this in context, just imagine trying to change a long-term habit (like smoking, overeating, watching too much TV, etc.) based on just getting feedback once or twice a month. We probably would not expect this method to be too successful. How then do we expect this frequency of feedback to modify behavior in the workplace? Both research and professional experience have demonstrated the need for more frequent consequences in order to change a long-term habit.

## 2. External consequences versus internal consequences

This leads us to another potential drawback for observation processes, which is the essential difference between external and internal consequences. Clearly, from an organizational perspective external consequences, feedback given by observers, are an important tool for changing behavior. However, external consequences can have significant limitations.

For instance, our response to consequences is dependent on many variables. If the definitions of key (or critical) behaviors are vague or otherwise inappropriate, a natural and typical response is to discount the feedback as meaningless. Another factor that can make the feedback irrelevant is the worker's perception and acceptance of either the observation process or the observer. Any resistance or blockage here can make the worker discount feedback he or she receives, lessening its value as a consequence. In extreme cases, we've seen cases where a worker bristles at the inappropriateness of the process or the feedback. In these situations, the observation operates as a punishing consequence and can potentially lead to overt resistance or even the reverse of the desired behavior – digging in their heels or directly pushing back. It is also important to remember that our behavior adapts to our learning, and that many times we respond to the presence of an observer rather than to the task or to the presence of a hazard. This has been well-documented as part of Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle."

Finally in many work environments, employees work independently, making very little contact with other workers, their supervisors or safety personnel. This autonomy limits an organization's ability to administer an effective observation process and provide any significant consequences at a frequency meaningful enough to set and reinforce desired actions. In these cases, the need for another technology for changing behavior is particularly apparent.

What about changing the workplace culture in order to change behavior?

1. Limits to span of influence or control

Leading or initiating culture change requires significant leadership from the top. Culture change may also call for organizational direction that is often beyond the span of influence or control of those charged with making safety improvements. In fact, one of the most common requests we receive from safety professionals is for information on how to get management to better provide more tangible leadership for culture change. Cultural change is critical to the mission of these professionals but conventional methods for accomplishing this may seem to be beyond their scope. Additionally, other factors, such as a tightening economy, restructuring, new ownership, etc., may even be driving the workplace culture in the opposite direction, towards a command-and-control style.

2. Long-term effort and/or crisis required

Another key constraint in inducing safer behaviors is that workplace cultural change is often the result of either long-term efforts or in reaction to a significant event. Events like the loss of a market segment and a need to reduce costs, or a serious injury (or string of injuries) can exert considerable pressure on the organization and interrupt the timeline for cultural change. In most cases, we do not have the option to wait for the culture to slowly change, and we are willing to initiate a loss of business or an increase in injuries in order to precipitate the desired change.

Do the benefits of incentives, rewards, and recognition programs and processes outweigh their potential drawbacks?

1. Works best for short-term improvements

Most experts agree there are some benefits to incentives as consequences for specific behavior(s). Unfortunately, in our experience there is a significant gap between the ideal and the actual. What we most often see are incentive programs that reward general results rather than specific behaviors. These programs reward the decrease in injuries to a group of employees, rather than recognizing and reinforcing desired behaviors. Although this approach can help make short-term changes, it is an inadequate approach for sustaining long-term transformation.

2. Requires an elaborate management system

Secondly, effectively managing a detailed, behavior-specific incentive process can require a significant level of tracking and reporting. The organizational resources needed and the scale of the tracking and recognition structure often break down over time due to the effort required to track the increased quantity of safe behaviors. The failure of the system can then lead to negative responses from those who have grown accustomed to the rewards of the process.

3. Infrequent and external consequence

Finally, some of the same issues that can plague an observation process, such as infrequent consequences and the value of external reinforcement versus internal reinforcement, can also detract from an incentive process.

Although there is a lot more that can be said about each of these conventional approaches, my intention is to demonstrate that a need exists for a complementary approach that helps resolve some of the limitations of the current monitoring-based methods for behavioral change. Experience has shown a more effective approach is to inspire people to change their own behavior.

## Inspire Through Discovery

You do not necessarily need to be “inspirational” in order to inspire others. You can create a climate of inspiration and strong self-motivation by giving others strategically structured opportunities to learn and to discover more effective and safer behaviors for themselves.

Technical information rarely changes behavior by itself. Yet, we are all aware of examples where individuals are expected to modify their actions after simply receiving training on a new regulation. Haven't we all known of employees who participated in training on a Safe Operating Procedure, and then following the training, almost immediately violated the requirement? It is clear that, as much as one might wish, it is not possible long-term to overpower habits or human nature by force-feeding information to others. Conversely, we have all likely had an “aha” moment where we have “discovered” the importance of a concept for ourselves, which in turn quickly and significantly changed our behavior.

For instance, have you ever been sitting in a restaurant and had the server tell you that a plate was hot, yet you still touched the plate to verify the temperature for yourself? Information learned from experience and insight feels different than information gathered while being “told.” And information learned through discovery has a more significant chance to change behavior.

Now this is not to say that we encourage the “hot plate” method of teaching (facilitating people getting mildly injured so they don't incur more severe problems), but rather that you think about how to attract your employees to important concepts or techniques or methods that will lead them to desire to change their behavior.

Let me share an illustration of this powerful and proven strategy.

Several years ago, one of our safety professionals was asked to conduct D.O.T. Hazardous Materials Training for a group of shipping department employees at a paper mill. Although they had previously been trained on the new standard, this group was resisting implementing the new procedures, claiming that they were an unnecessary burden.

The morning of the training arrived and during the opening comments, class was disrupted while a package was delivered to the room. One of the participants soon noticed that this package was leaking. When a couple of people got up to see if they could stop the spillage, they noticed the suspect liquid looked like blood, and also that the address on the return label was the “Center for Disease Control and Prevention” in Atlanta. Suddenly, no one wanted to touch the package or even be in the same room with it. The instructor quickly explained that he had created the package and arranged for it to be delivered in order to illustrate the dangers of handling an unidentified package. He then asked the class to identify and list all of the information they would want to know if they were to handle this parcel. Not surprisingly, their list matched up almost

exactly with the requirements of the standard. The training was completed with a high level of interest and participation. Even more importantly, their supervisor reported considerable improvements in the group's execution of the D.O.T. requirements.

This example illustrates the importance most of us place on discovery vs. being "told." People do not often "own" what they are told. Studies on "Cognitive Dissonance" have consistently revealed that buy-in, essential to beginning the process of behavioral change, occurs most frequently when people are active participants in a process. Actually doing something trumps just passively hearing. We all need opportunities to find reasons and solutions, and then to integrate that information in a new way to make it our own.

Another method we use to inspire discovery is to incorporate the reinforcing power of Kinesthetics. A feeling is worth a million words. Considerable improvements can occur when you help people develop a kinesthetic feel for safe work behaviors, beyond just an intellectual or visual image of what they are expected to do. You've heard the old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words. Agreed. But I suggest a feeling is worth a thousand pictures. For example, you can talk to someone about salt - its importance or history or chemical nature. But one taste will help me decide more about how I'd use it than a Britannica full of learned sentences. People who are good at anything, from welding to driving to woodworking to golf, develop a feeling for what they do. They kinesthetically sense how to position their task and their bodies, when to apply best timing, and make subconscious adjustments when things don't go exactly as planned.

We have found that by employing what people "feel", we can train them to be aware of their personal ergonomics to a very high level and to consequently better position themselves and move loads with greater leverage and decreased tension. For example, when teaching lifting, we have developed a wide array of paired demonstrations designed to guide participants towards noting changes in their balance, available strength, and concentration of tension and how this can improve as they make small adjustments. As they participate in these guided applied biofeedback experiments, they discover ways to increase their available strength while reducing the stress and strain on vulnerable areas in their body. Consider the contrast of this approach to the traditional approach of watching a video on lifting. There is no contest as to which method is more effective. As a direct result of participating in this "kinesthetic discovery" training, almost 100% of participant's report they replace older habits with more effective, safer actions. The consequence of "I feel less stress and strain when I stand this way" provides significant, ongoing, consistent, internal reinforcement.

We consistently find that experiencing kinesthetic insight strongly and consistently motivates people to change their behavior and then anchors the new actions. This changed behavior then "sticks" due to the frequent, internal reinforcement that the sense of learning and accomplishment creates. This approach to discovery learning combines well with the more traditional methods discussed above. Discovery is a powerful method for providing people the tools and knowledge they need to work safely. It provides an answer to the question, "How can we get people to do the 'right things' when they know no one is watching?"

## Inspire Ownership

Another method for creating a climate of inspiration is to develop an environment where people “own” components of the safety system. Many people are willing to give a lot of themselves in order to be a part of something that makes a positive difference. If you can offer that opportunity for people, it will not only inspire them, it will inspire you as well.

We have had many opportunities to work with individuals and organizations as they realize this truth. In one case a few years back, we were working with a client’s facility, Plant 9, which had the reputation as being the most difficult, most resistant plant in the nationwide organization. State regulations required them to have a safety committee, but they couldn’t get anyone to participate (or even show up for the coffee and donuts). Unfortunately, over the years a succession of plant managers frequently defaulted to either “making” or “bribing” people to participate. Before we could even begin to intervene in other ways, our primary challenge was to get employees to consider participating in safety activities.

Our underlying philosophy was that we needed to get everyone in Plant 9 to somehow own a piece of the safety system. The biggest question was where to start. Fortunately, the answer came soon. Unfortunately, it was in the form of a particularly dissatisfied employee, Merle.

During a meeting with us and one of his supervisors in a lunchroom, this worker burst in all agitated about the lack of follow up on a recent safety work request. Merle’s complaint was typical of Plant 9, “Around here, somebody has to hurt before you can get anything fixed!” After Merle left, his foreman told us that Merle had a lot of misdirected energy and that he was always complaining about lack of communication.

After a quick briefing, the plant manager agreed with our plan to offer Merle a chance to track completed safety work requests and to then post the information in the lunchrooms and clock alley. We took the maintenance department’s work order status report and offered it to Merle, who was surprised that this tracking even existed. We offered Merle the opportunity to spend up to an hour a month (the amount of time the plant manager had budgeted for participation in a safety committee) for collecting and posting the report. Merle seized the opportunity, and even began verifying the completeness of the work requests for himself.

Soon Merle was back. He said his report looked dull compared to some of the other reports that were posted nearby and he wanted to jazz up “his” in order to compete for the attention of his co-workers. He knew he was using all of his allotted time, but he also knew of a co-worker, Bruce, who was an amateur photographer. He asked if it would be okay for Bruce to have an hour a month to take digital photographs of the completed work and then print out the photos on a company printer for posting with the report. Done.

The next month, Merle and Bruce introduced us to Lana. Lana had experience working with computer graphics and art. They wanted to know if she could also join in. We showed her how to create posters reinforcing the current month’s safety focus, showcase safety alerts, create bulletins tracking guarding/access/ ergonomic changes, etc... and it was off to the races. Lana developed formats that were quickly borrowed by the other plants in the organization.

Before long, two other employees, Bob and Chris, were motivated by the effectiveness of the posters and came up with a “new” idea for using the technology to illustrate how to properly verify zero energy on the pneumatic equipment in their area ...

Soon they had a highly active Safety Team with more and more people working on safety projects.

Now, every month, one of the members of Plant 9’s Safety Team logs all of the previous month’s activities and gives them to Merle for posting. The activity levels are consistently outstanding. And, not surprisingly, safety performance has dramatically improved.

Sometimes inspiring others has little to do with you directly but more with creating an environment where people can lay claim to one component, and through pride of ownership inspire not only themselves, but also others. In the situation at Plant 9, we are convinced that we would have been out of luck if we had initially tried to recruit safety committee members. But when we gave people the chance to “own” something they cared about, the only struggle was staying one step ahead of the willing participants.

Furthermore, if we had been asked to prioritize the safety needs of Plant 9, communicating work order tracking would not have been the number one concern. However, because employees chose what was key to them, the amount of discretionary effort they were willing to expend was incredibly high. In Plant 9, the employees made so much progress so fast, they quickly moved onto other concerns, in each case finding someone who chose to own the issue.

Plant 9’s manager, Dwight, reported that his whole job changed as a result of the participation. He and the other managers are now able to devote more of their energy to important and longer-term issues, rather than fighting fires and trying to force change and improvement on an uncooperative workforce. The improvements have not just been limited to safety. Reductions in injury rate and improvements to the work environment have been exceptional.

There may be many understandable reasons why people don’t get involved in “your” safety program. It is important to remember that you are more likely to elicit involvement and behavior change if people form a strong positive intent or make a commitment to the change. And they are most likely to make this commitment if they internalize and “own” the need for the change.

## **Conclusion**

The power of inspiring people to embrace safety and behavioral change lies in changing the paradigm of “too few doing too much for too many.” In this paper, I’ve focused on only two strategies for inspiring behavioral change: promoting discovery and offering ownership. There is much more of course. But when you learn to inspire discovery and ownership, you can help your colleagues achieve superior safety performance and results for themselves and for your organization.



## Bibliography

DeJoy, David M. "Behavior change versus culture change: Divergent approaches to managing workplace safety" *Safety Science* 43 (2005) 105–129

Bowles, R. & Pater, R. "9 Keys for Directing Attention to Safety." *Occupational Hazards*. May 2007

Bowles, R. & Pater, R. "Directing Attention to Boost Safety Performance." *Occupational Hazards*. March 2007

Bowles, R. & Pater, R. "Inspiring Behavioral Change: Beyond Auditing." ASSE audio-conference, May 17, 2006

Pater, R. "Key Ingredients for Changing Behavior." *Occupational Health & Safety*. June 2007

Pater, R. "Motivating Ergonomic Behavior." *Occupational Hazards*. August 2006

Pater, R. "Inspiring Behavioral Change." *Occupational Hazards*. June 2006