

# CUSTOM BLEND

## Your Safety, Health & Environmental Program

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**D**ebate on the merits and applicability of behavior-based safety programs has intensified in recent years. Those new to the field or with only a passing interest may think that such vigorous debate is unprecedented in the industry. However, the history of the modern safety, health and environmental (SHE) movement is filled with similar debates.

Any student of safety and health programs will quickly learn that before the spotlight of scrutiny was focused on behavior-based safety, it shone brightly on job safety analysis, joint labor/management safety committees, safety incentives, incident control, communication techniques to develop a safety culture and the declaration of interdependence, among others.

Each method has had strong advocates and detractors. Those who had benefitted (e.g., reduced fatalities, property loss and illnesses) from one particular program would vigorously champion its principles, resulting in widespread experimentation throughout industry and business. As acceptance grew, so did backlash to the overall method or its particular application, as some organizations found that a significant investment did not produce expected returns. Over time, safety and health professionals would eagerly search for some new alternative that would further enhance efforts to reduce injuries and illnesses.

**An interesting analogy can be drawn between safety and paint, the authors explain.**

### COMPARING SAFETY PROGRAMS TO PAINT

Although it is important to understand and apply specific accident prevention policies, in the authors' opinion, too many safety professionals get hamstrung trying to focus on a particular type of program without having a framework or overall rationale.

To combat this problem, it is useful to develop an analogy of safety programs and efforts. This thought process not only facilitates the decision-making process in regard to various program elements, it also provides a powerful tool for communicating the program to the rest of the organization.

For example, one effective analogy is to compare an SHE program to paint. While the connection between these two may seem far-fetched at first, an interesting analogy can be made.

•Just like paint should cover the entire surface to offer adequate protection, so too should an SHE program reach all areas of the organization. If only the visible portion of a set of stairs is painted,

deterioration can creep in through the unprotected portions. An SHE program is not effective if it merely covers the visible areas of the manufacturing department and ignores the office, loading dock and parking lot. Many organizations ultimately find that using the safety program to "paint" well-hidden areas such as off-the-job safety and wellness also protects the value of their human infrastructure.

•Paint that is applied too thin does not protect well and looks inferior. An SHE program that is stretched too thin by lack of resources is similar to watered-down paint—it will not look good nor will it perform well.

•Painting addresses both aesthetic and functional needs. In the same way that a professionally painted building or room creates an image or environment to work in, so does a safety program. An effective program can set the tone, mood and standard for an entire operation.

•Paint helps tie together or blend in diverse structural, mechanical and finished components. An effective SHE program helps to blend production, quality, profitability and working environment into an efficient composite.

•Paint adds value. Any safety and health program that does not do the same for the organization is doomed to fail.

•Paint must be reapplied on a regular basis. Any program that has become moribund is probably peeling away from the core of the organization like neglected, weathered paint.

# The goal is to encourage safety and health professionals to think about the specific elements of their programs and make reasoned choices about what blend will work best for their particular organization.

•Paint is not a substitute for structural integrity. Using paint to mask major deficiencies merely hides problems; it does not correct them. Safety bingo or similar motivational programs will not prevent accidents if machine guarding is absent or monitors are not available for pre-entry inspection of a confined space.

Using this analogy, one can draw many more connections to help guide safety-related actions and explain programs. In addition, other equally valuable organizational pictures can be created to frame key safety and health messages. All that is needed is some creative brainstorming to find an analogy that is meaningful to a given organization.

## CUSTOM COLORING THE BASE

In some respects, the arguments behind behavior-based safety (or any of the other specific safety programs) as a complete solution to safety and health needs is akin to buying an off-the-shelf color of paint. While a large selection of pre-packaged colors—and pre-packaged safety and health programs—are available, such products will likely not set the right tone for most organizations.

This does not mean that such programs should be discounted. The convenience and speed at which such products can be applied is especially useful for businesses that have no safety programs or culture in place. Think of this as untreated wood being exposed to the weather. The more quickly some form of paint is applied, the better, even if it is not exactly the right shade.

For companies that already have programs, however, the objective is to provide greater value through accident and cost reduction, higher quality and improved morale. In these situations, more time and effort can be invested to select the right blend of program elements that will produce the best results. This means the SHE program must be fitted to the organization's existing hierarchical structure and mission.

Now, stretch the analogy. Consider how a safety and health program could be blended before thinking about tints that go into the "color." One must decide which base will be used. Be it oil or latex, flat or semi-gloss, paint has certain basic characteristics, including the solids, which carry pigment, and the liquids, which allow it to spread. Similarly, an SHE program has base components at its

foundation. In the authors' opinion, the liquids and solids of an effective program are management involvement and a desire to protect people and property. If either of these is lacking, no amount of tinting will make up the deficiency.

Once the base is in place, customization can begin. Just as all paint shades contain some primary colors, so does each safety program element contain some percentage of "primary activity." Does the program need a boost in regulatory compliance? Perhaps a full measure of accident investigation? Proactive safety inspections must be in the mix, but how much?

Once these primary tints have been added, the fun begins. Just as those last little dabs of color change the complexion of a paint when it is mixed, the little bursts of extra effort into an SHE program can produce exciting results. Want a bright, flashy program? Add some high-profile safety posters and banners together with an exciting incentive program and special parking places for employees observed performing safe work activities.

Need a bit more serious tone due to current accident rate or a rash of injuries? In such cases, the custom tints may encompass job safety analysis, behavior-based safety training, and integration of safety and health responsibilities into all job descriptions.

The point here is not to provide a specific prescription or formula for an SHE program that will work in every organization. Rather, the goal is to encourage safety and health professionals to think about the specific elements of their programs and make reasoned choices about what blend will work best for their particular organization. In reality, an effective SHE program is a combination of various approaches and techniques.

## REPAINTING THE SAFETY PROGRAM

The paint analogy is also effective because using this mental picture encourages innovation. While some facilities and residences are rarely repainted, applying new layers and colors to various surfaces is an accepted part of any preventive maintenance program. In addition, new paint is often applied if an area's use, user or owner changes. These same factors would apply to reinvigoration of an SHE program.

For example, any time new work activities are introduced, the SHE program

should be re-examined to see whether it matches the new "decor." Some slight change in the program mix may be needed. Likewise, any workforce transformation due to factors such as attrition, expansion or site relocation should trigger appropriate adjustments by the safety staff. When someone buys a new house, s/he is likely to repaint it to match his/her taste. In today's world of mergers and acquisitions, new corporate owners are fairly common and the SHE program should be adjusted to correspond with the owner's business philosophy.

Another reason to paint is to freshen up something that's become a bit dull. The wise owner or maintenance manager knows not to wait until the paint is peeling. Similarly, safety managers should realize it is difficult for any single safety philosophy to maintain its luster over time. Rather than "washing the walls" by trying different variations of the same old thing, it is best to use such opportunities to inject some different colors into the bucket of accident prevention techniques. It might be surprising to see how just a little change in the mix can create a whole new atmosphere for safety and health within an organization. ■

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