

# Discipline in the Extremes

*Potentially damaging to behavioral safety processes*

By Larry I. Perkinson

**D**ISCIPLINE CAN BE DEFINED as 1) a control gained by enforcing obedience or order; and 2) orderly or prescribed conduct or pattern of behavior (*Merriam Webster Dictionary*). Many proponents of behavioral safety adhere to the axiom that "discipline for violating safety norms should not be directly associated with the behavioral observation process."

However, this axiom has been misapplied at both ends of the spectrum. Some have taken it to mean that discipline should never be applied to anything which comes close to the behavioral process. Others have discarded the behavioral safety process because they believe it eliminates discipline throughout the entire safety process. Both views do a disservice to behavioral safety and the potential success such a process can produce. A happy medium can be found, however (Krause 59).

## It Starts with Trust

Many behavioral safety practitioners (including the author) believe trust must be built into a behavioral safety observation process (Krause 178-179). One way in which this can be achieved is to not record the name of the person being observed on the observation form. This prevents supervisors or managers from using the process as a disciplinary tool. If employees know or suspect that observations will be used for disciplinary purposes, their trust and acceptance of the process is destroyed, as is process effectiveness.

This does not mean that discipline is never applied to safety-related behaviors included in the observation process, however; it simply means that no discipline is directly related to the observations themselves. When implemented properly, this process can work well with a company's culture with respect to discipline.

For example, a large, national telephone and communications firm implemented a behavioral process in part of its organization in which supervisors performed most of the observations. Results in this location were positive, but as the process spread to other facilities, some resistance was encountered. It was perceived that if a supervisor or manager observed

an employee engaged in at-risk behaviors that were identified as life-threatening and would normally subject the employee to immediate discharge, the supervisor/manager would, as a result of the behavior-based process, be prohibited from taking corrective action or disciplining the employee.

During training, supervisors and managers learned that while observation forms were not to be used for disciplinary purposes, discipline for safety purposes had not been eliminated. When rolling out the process to this part of the organization, employees were told that if a life-threatening behavior occurred while a supervisor was performing a formal observation, the observation was immediately terminated and current policies regarding imminent danger situations would be followed. With this measure in place, discipline was separated from the observation process, but not from the safety process.

A less-dramatic example occurred in a large, regional newspaper publishing company. The company had implemented a behavioral safety process that helped improve employee morale, contributed to a significant drop in OSHA incident rates and helped save more than \$1 million in workers' compensation costs.

However, results in one department did not mirror those throughout the rest of the company. During a steering team meeting, this department's manager suggested that the names of employees in her department be added to the observation forms so she could see who was violating established safe behaviors. She planned to use the information to discipline those employees.

In this case, the observation process revealed the true problem: Department supervisors were not enforcing established safety rules. By doing nothing to address at-risk behaviors, the supervisors were positively reinforcing those behaviors. If anyone were to be disciplined in this case, it should have been the supervi-

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*In some cases, negative reinforcement and punishment must be used to initiate the proper behaviors so that they can then be positively reinforced.*

sors. Accountability measures had been established for supervisors relative to the behavioral process. However, what was occurring outside the behavioral process was rendering the observations and feedback ineffective. Supervisors simply ignored work behaviors that violated safety policy. When observers saw the same behavior and offered constructive feedback, the process was undermined by the supervisors' lack of enforcement. Their message was that the behavior was acceptable.

Supervisors must supervise. Part of their responsibilities is to enforce order for the purpose of safety. Safety responsibilities of supervisors and managers outside the behavioral process do not disappear just because a company implements a behavioral safety process. Some procedures may need to be changed in order to accommodate a behavior-based initiative, but management cannot abdicate its safety authority and responsibility in the process.

#### **The Role of Consequences**

In *Bringing Out the Best in People*, Aubrey Daniels describes four types of consequences and presents them in a matrix (Figure 1). The left column indicates what most people want, the right column what

they do not want. The top row indicates what a person gets, the bottom row what a person does not get or avoids. These four quarters indicate the four types of consequences:

- When we "get" what we "want," that is R+ or positive reinforcement.
- When we "get" what we "don't want," that is P or punishment.
- When we "don't get" what we "want," that is E or extinction.
- When we "don't get" (avoid) what we "don't want," that is R- or negative reinforcement (often described as the threat of punishment).

For example, when an employee performs a behavior safely and receives recognition from the observer or a supervisor, s/he is getting what s/he wants. As a result, the behavior is more likely to be repeated. This is positive reinforcement.

Now suppose an employee receives a written warning citing an unsafe behavior. This warning will likely affect his/her performance appraisal, salary increase and advancement potential, so the employee is getting something s/he does not want. Thus, the behavior is less likely to recur, at least in the short term. This is punishment.

Discipline is often referred to as being constructive to produce desired change. Punishment is often referred to as vindictive. Although the term punishment is used in the behavioral model, it is simply a psychological term describing a category of consequences. Although discipline may have a much better chance of producing the desired effect than punishment, the object in this case is not the motivation for the action or how it was applied, it is how the person receiving it views it and its power to predict future behavior. However, without succinctly defining and reinforcing the desired behavior, one cannot guarantee what behavior might replace the behavior that prompted the initial warning (punishment).

If a supervisor tells an employee that s/he must stop taking extended breaks or s/he may be terminated, the employee will likely change the behavior in order to avoid what s/he does not want (in this case, being fired). This is negative reinforcement.

Suppose an employee strives to keep a work area clean and well-maintained, attends and participates in safety meetings, or volunteers to serve on a safety committee, all in hope of raising the safety rating on his/her performance review to "exceeds expectations." If the supervisor does not even mention the extra effort, much less change the rating on the review, the extra effort will likely cease. The employee did not get what

s/he wanted. This is extinction.

All four consequences should be used appropriately in a well-balanced safety process. By refusing to apply any discipline to behaviors included in the observation process—even if the discipline is not the result of the process—management assumes that positive reinforcement is the only consequence which can be applied for the process to succeed. Such a strategy misses a key point, however: It is not possible to positively reinforce a behavior that is not happening.

Positive reinforcement is a key component of the success of any behavioral process. However, to say that it is the only type of consequence which can or should be applied is counterproductive. Sometimes, negative reinforcement and/or punishment is needed to elicit a behavior (Daniels 48-

49). Once the desired behavior is started, it must be strongly reinforced at every opportunity in order to increase the likelihood that it will continue.

### Examples from Practice

#### Rubber Compounding Facility

At a rubber compounding facility of an international tire maker, one department (500 employees) had implemented a behavioral process. The process was to be launched within another large production department (300 employees) that produced a rubber fabric with embedded steel wires for use in steel-belted radial tires. The machinery central to the process took the rubber fabric from one end of the department to the other. Due to overhead machinery configurations, no conveyor crossovers were possible, so employees had to walk a long distance from one side of the machinery to the other.

One behavior the new process was to address was walking on the rubber fabric on the conveyor to get to the other side. This "crossover" was an established at-risk behavior and safety rules had been enacted to prohibit it. Despite this, many supervisors typically turned their heads because crossing over sped production.

When observations began, little safe behavior was available to be reinforced. When observation results continued to show a very low percent of safe behavior (that is, employees still were not walking to the end of the conveyor to cross), the steering committee and management devised a solution. It was announced that all employees would receive a three-week grace period during which time any employee seen walking on the fabric/conveyor would be reminded that the behavior was hazardous. At the end of that time, supervisors would begin to deliver formal verbal and written warnings that would be placed in an employee's file.

Unfortunately, this at-risk behavior was strongly embedded in the work process. At the end of the grace period, a substantial number of workers were

Figure 1

### Consequences Matrix

	Want	Don't Want
Get	R+ Positive Reinforcement	P Punishment
Don't Get (or Avoid)	E Extinction	R- Negative Reinforcement

*The safety responsibilities of supervisors and managers outside the behavioral process do not disappear just because a company implements a behavioral safety process.*

still crossing the conveyor. It took only a few formal warnings to quickly make it clear that management was serious. These warnings were given by supervisors, not observers, and were not associated with the behavioral process. In this situation, negative reinforcement and punishment were needed to jumpstart safe behavior; that behavior was then positively reinforced both by behavioral observers and supervisors.

#### **Newspaper Plant**

A similar result was achieved within a newspaper plant. In this case, PPE use was the focus. Although the plant's behavior checklist included wearing safety shoes, many employees were entry level and perceived the cost of these shoes as high. Many had also reasoned that since no one had been sent home for not wearing them, it was not a real concern.

Noting this problem, the plant created a stipend program to help employees pay for the shoes; management then notified all employees that they had one month to purchase the shoes and begin wearing them to work each day. Behavioral observers and supervisors would remind employees not wearing safety shoes of the impending deadline.

Although many employees had purchased and were wearing shoes when the deadline arrived, percent safe was still only at 40 percent. To move this to an acceptable level, supervisors had to send some workers home (punishment) in order to prove that management was serious. Percent safe increased to 80 percent. Again, discipline was handled by supervisors and was separated from the behavioral process.

#### **Petrochemical Company**

A petrochemical company had identified lack of PPE use as a major contributor to workers' compensation costs. A behavioral consultant was engaged to analyze those procedures that would affect compliance with PPE requirements and to make field observations in order to determine whether such procedures were being followed. The procedures served as the checklist for the consultant to use in observing for safe behavior.

In one of the company's northeast petrochemical terminals, observations revealed that compliance with one PPE requirement was zero. During a meeting with the facility's human resources manager, the consultant asked the manager to review his records and determine how many disciplinary actions had been initiated during the previous 30 months for PPE violations. The answer was none.

Had a behavioral safety observation process been in place, it likely would not have affected this particular behavior. There was no safe behavior to reinforce. In such cases, management must exercise its authority and responsibility to use appropriate disciplinary measures in order to produce a degree of safe behavior that can be positively reinforced by observers.

#### **Addressing the Missing Link**

As these examples illustrate, when failure to comply with established safety policies is widespread, employees are not to blame. They are being posi-

tively reinforced by supervisors and managers to ignore such policies. A supervisor may not actually tell an employee, "Don't wear your safety glasses and faceshield," but when that employee does not wear this gear and the supervisor says nothing, the result is the same. Doing/saying nothing becomes a consequence for the employee. It indicates that the safe behavior is not important and that the employee need not bother with it [Perkinson(a)].

Some may approach such a problem by simply measuring it, adhering to the adage that "what gets measured gets done." However, it is not what is measured that gets done—it is what gets measured and reinforced that gets done. One can measure PPE compliance. However, if compliance is low, measurement alone will not increase it. Safe behavior must be reinforced—and sometimes at-risk behavior must be punished in the behavioral sense.

The missing link may be measuring and positively reinforcing supervisors and managers for the specific actions they take to support the behavioral process. These measures might include having a behavior checklist for supervisors with such items as reinforcing observers; discussing observation data during safety or operational meetings; surveying the work area to reinforce safe behaviors with employees; implementing action plans developed by the process steering committee; and ensuring that observers on his/her crew perform the required number of observations.

Metrics for managers might include discussing observation data in staff meetings; asking staff regarding the status of action plan items affecting their area of supervision; verifying that celebrations were held when production units achieved percent safe or action plan goals; and reinforcing observers.

However, measuring and positively reinforcing these parameters for supervisors and managers alone may not produce the desired results. If there is not enough activity/behavior to positively reinforce, just as with employees, negative reinforcement and punishment must be used to initiate the proper management behaviors so that they can then be positively reinforced.

#### **Revisiting the Newspaper Plant**

The newspaper plant mentioned earlier implemented specific, behavioral measurements for its supervisors and managers. Supervisors were held responsible for whether behavioral observers who worked for them completed their assigned observations. Since observations are fundamental to a behavioral safety implementation, it is crucial that they be completed. At this plant, being an observer was initially voluntary; however, once a person agreed to become an observer, the observation process became part of his/her job description, just like production and quality.

One supervisor's observers had consistently failed to perform their observations at the required frequency. It was the supervisor's job to take action to make sure they did so. This involved providing employees the time to perform the observations and reminding

them to do so; and providing positive reinforcement when observations were completed and negative reinforcement/punishment when they were not.

Several attempts were made to convince this supervisor that the success of the process depended on his support. The supervisor agreed that observations were important and should be done, yet nothing changed.

The steering committee finally reported the matter to plant management. In this facility, plant management had taken the stance that safety was as important a function in the plant as production and quality, and took the same steps it would have had the supervisor failed to meet production quotas and quality standards. Observation frequency subsequently improved.

In "Leadership Issues in Implementing Change: It's All a Matter of Behavior," Pinney and McSween state, "Develop measures of accountability for the successful adoption and implementation of the change initiative for the leadership group. *The measures should prompt either positive recognition to leadership gaining success or remedial actions for leaders that aren't actively supporting the change* (emphasis added)" (Pinney and McSween).

In discussing how to achieve leader buy-in to necessary management behaviors, these authors also note that "if you have a leader [who] has been trained and knows what [s/he is] supposed to do, but either lacks the capability or has made the decision to engage in active nonsupport, you must change out the person or change out the job" (Pinney and McSween). Such measurements should also be used to help hold managers accountable for the bottom line on safety (such as workers' compensation costs). While it is usually not good to use these costs as an indicator at the department manager level, they can be linked to the behavioral process with plant/location operating data [Perkinson(b)].

For example, one large organization used such measures to determine the "cap" that operating locations were charged on workers' compensation case costs. If a location's safety process measurements (including the behavioral process) were at an acceptable level, the location had a cap of \$25,000 for any single workers' compensation case. This meant that only the first \$25,000 was charged to the location's bottom line when computing its profitability. Locations without good process measurements had no cap. Thus, if a workers' compensation case cost \$150,000, the facility bore the entire brunt of those costs against their bottom line.

Another approach is to give locations with good process results a "credit" on their workers' compensation costs. Conversely, even if a location has low workers' compensation costs, if it has poor process measurements, it would be charged an additional fee. In this scenario, because safety process scores are low, the facility is viewed as an accident waiting to happen. Charging the extra fee is like putting money aside of an anticipated expense (Pliska).

To a degree, however, supervisors and managers

need to be held personally accountable for the results as well as the process. If barriers to safe behavior have been removed, yet at-risk behavior continues, one must ask about the use of discipline in safety processes. Discipline is not reserved for employees. In most of the examples discussed, supervisors and managers played a key role in poor safety performance.

Eliminating discipline from safety processes is not the answer nor is relying solely on positive reinforcement. While companies attempt to separate discipline from the behavioral observation process by eliminating names from observation forms, discipline is a consequence that must be used at times to generate behavior which can be positively reinforced. It is the proper balance of these techniques—using positive reinforcement abundantly and using discipline as infrequently as possible—which ensures that the behavioral observation process remains effective. ■

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