What's Missing from your Safety Management System?

By Judy Agnew & Cloyd Hyten

Safety has come a very long way in the last two decades. Not too long ago a company's "Safety Management System" consisted of some training, weekly safety meetings, and investigations when incidents occurred. Today, many companies have developed very sophisticated Safety Management Systems (SMS) including a wide range of components such as: thorough safety training and communication plans, comprehensive risk management processes including

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pre-job hazard analysis, emergency preparedness plans, ergonomic programs, leader safety interactions, health and wellness programs, management audits for safety assurance, and peer observation systems. These new systems help to educate, clarify roles and responsibilities, and address a wide range of safety issues. Importantly, these systems are more proactive and preventative than traditional SMS and they encourage engagement at all levels.

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Despite the vast improvement in Safety Management Systems, they are often missing one very crucial component—**effective behavior management to ensure that the tools and processes outlined in the SMS are being used as intended, and are having a positive impact.** Viewing SMS from a behavioral science perspective, it is clear that most of the components of these systems fall into the category of antecedents—things that prompt desired behaviors (set people up to do the right thing). The science is clear that while antecedents are necessary, alone they are not sufficient for sustaining behavior. **Without deliberate feedback and positive reinforcement built into the SMS, one or more of the following is highly likely:**

- Inconsistent use of tools such as hazard assessments (sometimes they are done, sometimes they are not done, and they are often not done when things change during a work task)
- Ineffective use of processes such as pre-shift safety meetings (supervisors go through the motions but fail to get crews engaged in meaningful conversations about the work ahead, and how best to do that work safely)
- Senior leader safety tours focus on finding things wrong and leave employees feeling discouraged and resentful
- Peer observation systems focus on less important, but easy-to-observe behaviors
- Hazard reporting and remediation systems fail to provide follow-up feedback and leave employees wondering if what they report is being taken care of
- Near-miss reporting systems capture only a fraction of what is really going on

If any or all of these challenges are present in your organization, behavioral science and behavior management technology can help. **Safety Management Systems are all about behavior—they are about identifying all the things that need to be done to make the workplace as safe as possible.** This includes behavior at the front line all the way up to the boardroom. As noted, while a good SMS outlines what needs to be done and pro-

vides tools for doing it, most do not integrate the learnings from behavioral science to ensure that those things get done and get done well. While there is much the science teaches us, here are a few tips that can help you make your SMS more effective:

- **Don't rely on telling and training.** Even the best antecedents won't result in persistent behavior change. To build safe habits you need deliberate and sophisticated use of positive reinforcement.

- **Be cautious with negative consequences.** Formal discipline may be part of your behavior management toolset, but it is easy to overuse it. When the balance of consequences favors the negative, engagement is undermined and safety culture development is stunted.

- **Remember that behavior is fluid, not static.** Changes in the social and physical environment are constantly influencing behavior, so even well-taught safe behaviors can drift toward at-risk behaviors over time—unless you manage behavior systematically.

- **Take the time to investigate the existing consequences for at-risk behavior.** There are many subtle but powerful consequences that encourage behaviors inconsistent with your SMS. Understanding this will help you be more effective in proactively preventing injuries and incidents.

Once your Safety Management System has all the tools and processes needed, set your sights on applying behavior technology to ensure you get the maximum benefit from those tools and processes. Encourage your management team to engage in deliberate coaching—providing helpful feedback and meaningful consequences (largely positive ones) around the behaviors required by your SMS. This will ensure that the elements of the system are being used as intended and, more importantly, are having the impact you need and want.

For a quick and affordable way to evaluate your SMS, ADI offers customized Safety Assessments. Or, to learn more about applying behavioral science to your SMS, contact us today.

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