



## Earning Voluntary Participation in Behavioral Safety Observations (BSOs)

By Bart Sevin, Ph.D.

**I**mproving engagement in Behavioral Safety Observations (BSOs), especially peer-to-peer observations, is challenging. Many organizations launch BSO systems only to find little to no participation. In response, management often sets quotas to increase the number of observations, but it usually decreases the quality of the data as participants pencil-whip observation forms. What organizations really want is voluntary participation, not box-checking.

A more helpful approach begins with understanding the conditions under which people resist BSOs and then addressing gaps or opportunities prior to BSO implementation. There are often several systems issues that lead to resistance. The most common are reporting systems, work order systems, and communication systems. Based on a variety of client engagements, what follows is an example of how these systems can interact with each other in ways that damage trust, relationships, and the safety culture.

**Organizations want voluntary participation, not box-checking.**



### ABC ORGANIZATION'S STRUGGLE WITH BSOs

ABC Organization<sup>1</sup> is a manufacturer with multiple reporting options for workers to escalate safety issues. Formal systems include verbally conveying an item to one's direct supervisor, writing items on boards posted

in the plant, and entering items directly into a database. Informal systems involve calling someone in maintenance or someone other than an immediate supervisor (e.g., the EHS manager). Because of the

multiple, competing, and redundant escalation methods, ABC doesn't have a comprehensive or master list of all outstanding safety issues that can be reviewed, tracked, and shared. Workers default to the method that works best, which is usually the workaround.

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Frontline employees and management often disagree about whether a specific safety issue has even been reported. While word-of-mouth reporting is convenient for workers (i.e., no paperwork), sometimes supervisors forget about an item. Even though management provides workers with access to the work order system, many are not comfortable with computers. For those that do use the work order system, item status is listed as either "open" or "closed," but additional details are not included. As a result, there is a widespread employee perception that management doesn't fix safety issues or doesn't fix them quickly. Even when management does address safety concerns, there isn't a clear record of what they have done so management rarely gets credit for doing their part.

ABC's communication about safety issues from management to front line is inconsistent

<sup>1</sup>ABC is a fictional organization based on ADI's experience with hundreds of client organizations over many years and represents commonalities we've observed across organizations and over time.



and varies across leaders. Frontline workers report they sporadically hear about reported safety issues, injuries, and near misses from other departments or other sites, although most people agree the information is important for them to hear. When production demands increase or leaders leave ABC, the information stops altogether. Given that the ineffectiveness of the reporting, work order, and communication systems feeds the perception that management isn't doing their part in safety, it is no surprise that workers resist doing BSOs.

### GOOD PERFORMERS AND BAD SYSTEMS

As Rummler and Brache<sup>1</sup>, in their classic, *Improving Performance* (1995), remind us, “If you pit a good performer against a bad system, the system will win almost every time.” Management’s fundamental responsibility to employees is to set them up for success by providing the training, tools, resources, systems and processes, etc., on the front end to enable

them to work safely. So, what would it look like for leaders to address the systems gaps in the existing systems before introducing BSOs?

- **Consolidate Reporting.** A reasonable first step is to provide clear escalation methods (the fewer the better) that create a paper or digital trail for tracking purposes. This means frontline workers need one or more options to add a safety item to the list themselves, rather than depending on someone else to add an item or decide whether an item even makes the cut.
- **Create a Master List.** Once people begin using the designated reporting process, someone must do something with the items reported. Creating a comprehensive or master list of all safety concerns that can be tracked and shared publicly increases transparency and accountability. If an item doesn't show up on the master list, then the reporting system isn't working properly, or workers may not have reported the issue. If an item shows up on the master list but remains open over time, then management has feedback suggesting they may need to reallocate resources or make other changes that allow for timely resolutions. And when progress is documented and items are closed out, management (and the front line to the extent they provide input) can take credit for working together to create a safer workplace.

**Creating a master list of reported issues increases transparency and accountability.**

<sup>1</sup>Rummler, G. A., & Brache, A. P. (1995). *Improving Performance: How to Manage the White Space on the Organization Chart* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

- **Be Transparent about Prioritization.** Developing a process for and sharing how items are prioritized (e.g., risk-based matrix) helps everyone understand why a given safety item remains open in the context of the entire list. The challenge for management is now that a comprehensive list exists, they need to systematically address items on the list.
- **Communicate Regularly.** Pushing out updated information on the list on some regular cadence (e.g., weekly) with relevant stakeholders is critical to management rebuilding the trust. Existing opportunities for updates include shift change meetings, EHS meetings, or town hall meetings. Organizations report that it's easier to sustain the communication piece when they integrate into existing meetings rather than adding new ones. The safety portions of these meetings are opportunities to share related information about incidents, injuries, and near misses to drive organizational learning.
- **Align Work Order and Other Systems.** Because safety issues often show up in work order or related systems, organizations may need to align these systems. Examples include making sure the right people have access to the systems and adding information fields (e.g., “status update” or “owner” fields) that improve transparency and information sharing.

### WHO GOES FIRST MATTERS

When considering implementation of BSOs, applying the principle of reciprocity<sup>ii</sup> can help organizations increase the chances people will say “yes” to BSOs. When management first demonstrates their commitment to safety by improving the safety systems and processes and addressing known safety issues, the likelihood that frontline workers will respond in kind when asked to participate in BSOs increases. The steps management takes will pay dividends as workers feel management hears their concerns and cares enough to go first to keep people safe.

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<sup>ii</sup> Cialdini, R. (2009). *Influence: Science and Practice*. Pearson Education.



## [About the Author]

### **BART SEVIN**



As a highly trained and experienced Board Certified Behavior Analyst, Bart helps organizations examine systems, processes, and people strategies to ensure that

their motivational initiatives are aligned to promote business success and drive their desired outcomes. Bart works with clients from a variety of business sectors including Manufacturing, Energy, Banking, Heavy Construction, Automotive Financial Services, and Insurance. He has presented at national safety and other professional conferences, including Behavioral Safety Now and the annual meeting of the Association for Behavior Analysis International.

## [About ADI]

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