

# Watch and learn

Behavioural-based safety (BBS) observations are a popular tool for many organisations. In this article ANDREW SHARMAN traces the roots of the process and offers five steps to great safety observations



In striving to improve safety performance and lower accident rates, organisations typically work systematically through three phases. The first phase focuses on building infrastructure – getting the systems, policies and procedures in place to provide a framework for working safely.

This brings about a sense of structure, order and discipline, which usually has a beneficial effect on performance. However, as the systems bed into place, often the direct impact on accident and incident rates begins to slow down and reach a plateau.

It's at this point that the organisation finds a renewed vigour and promptly organises refresher training, additional supervision and shiny new signs, to remind people to work safely, appear around the workplace, but, just as with the first phase,

this second wave also crashes onto the beach of the performance plateau.

Many of our clients, around the world, come to us at this point and ask what can be done to “move the needle”, to create a catalyst for action, and to shift them closer to their ultimate goal of zero injuries.

Before we go on, look back at those first two phases. What do you notice? That's right, both focus on formality; rules and the enforcement of rules. Now think about another question: Do you like to work within a rigid structure and be constantly reminded about what you must do, or do you prefer to have information and guidance explained to you, be trusted to get on with things, and then recognised when you do a good job? I'm guessing it's the second of these two, right?

So let's turn the spotlight onto the actual behaviour of those who work with us and see if we can view it from a different perspective.

## SHINE A LIGHT

In 1920, Australian sociologist Elton Mayo and his team of researchers wanted to study the effect of physical work conditions on productivity. Mayo's ground-breaking study focused on the production lines of the Western Electric Company, at their factories in Hawthorne, a suburb of Chicago in the United States of America.

Mayo created two groups of employees as the subjects of the study. All workers were employed as production-line operators, working on similar manual activities within the factory environment. One group was steadily exposed to fluctuations in lighting within their work areas while the second group (the 'control group') worked in an area where the lighting remained unchanged for the duration of the study. Mayo's hypothesis was that those working with enhanced lighting would be more productive.



Day after day the lighting was gradually increased for group one and the research team observed carefully. Just as the scientists had anticipated, the productivity of workers in the highly illuminated work area improved. It must have been an exciting conclusion, and one that would have thrilled the management of the Western Electric Company. You can imagine the rush to order additional lighting fittings for the entire factory!

Mayo and his team of scientists departed the factory, pleased with their discovery, but the success was short-lived. Within days of the study ending, the productivity of the group of workers who enjoyed the enhanced lighting returned to the previous levels. What happened?

#### WATCH AND LEARN

Mayo and his team returned to the factory

and a second round of studies began. They observed closely and again the productivity of the group with extra lighting began to soar, even going beyond the increased productivity noted in the first round. The scientists were puzzled – at face value, they appeared to be able to prove and further support their initial thesis that more light resulted in more productivity.

Mayo decided to wander over to the control group and see how they were doing. Within a short time of the researchers setting up camp, something amazing occurred – the productivity of the control group started to increase. Even without the additional lighting, workers were getting more done.

After further observation, the scientists revised their hypotheses and advanced that productivity increased not due to the changes in the work environment, but because of the attention levied on the workers by the research team.

The “Hawthorne Effect”, as it has become known, refers to the tendency of some people to work harder and perform better when they are aware that they are being observed. It seemed to matter not whether a light was being shone on them, when they realised they were being watched, workers simply wanted to be seen “in the best light”. Mayo’s conclusion was that individuals appear to change their behaviours as a direct result of the attention they receive.

#### OBSERVING BEHAVIOUR

There are many proprietary tools available on the market now to help you build a format for behavioural safety observations. Several of these come complete with little pre-printed notecards with prompts for what should be observed. These may be useful to you in your own journey to improve safety, but they’re not essential.

You can build your own template – or, for those feeling brave, why not ditch the idea of a proforma and instead think about the behaviour and the communication best practices you would want your observer to display.

What’s the point of observations? Well, they can help us gather information to improve the way we work and make things safer. This information can also help us to avoid events that could cause harm to our people, our business and our environment. They’re also a great way to demonstrate

that safety is important to the organisation and its leaders.

Current research indicates that around 85 percent of what we learn comes from observation of our peers, and as little as five percent from the formal training we receive. As Elton Mayo and his team found out, the power of positive observation is enormous!

#### STEPS TO GREAT SAFETY OBSERVATIONS

##### 1 Be brave

One of the easiest ways to make an impact during a safety observation is to pussyfoot around. At a site in Johannesburg, recently, I noticed a manager gingerly hanging around on the edge of a work area. After a full minute checking that the coast was clear, he locked his sights on a poor unsuspecting employee and rushed straight towards him. During his approach he aborted his mission, twice.

The third time he was lucky and the connection was made with the worker, who, by this time, was thoroughly confused about this leader’s intention. There was plenty of impact – all of which was negative. In the workplace, nothing arouses suspicion and fosters a lack of trust more than a manager who looks as though he doesn’t know what he’s doing.

Sure, it’s easier for managers to sit tight in their offices, behind the urgent spreadsheets and workplans, but getting out of the comfort zone and onto the shopfloor is critical to success. It’s likely that you will have to talk to people you may not know well. You may hear information that is difficult to take, because it may generate more work for you. Be brave.

##### 2 Plan

Safety observations are not about wandering round smiling and shaking hands. They are not PR exercises. They require careful thought, preparation and skill. Before you step foot on the shopfloor ask yourself:

- Where will I walk?
- What am I likely to encounter?
- Who will be there?
- What are their roles?
- What safety events have happened here recently?
- What story can I tell to break the ice?

Prepare yourself for the observation by ensuring that you have the relevant personal protective equipment to enter the work area. ➤

Be mindful of the work activities taking place; if the environment contains lots of chemicals, dust or dirt you may not wish to wear your best suit.

As you enter the workspace look carefully in front, above, below, around and behind you to identify any potential hazards and familiarise yourself with the work area. Pay particular attention to warning signs and other local rules posted in the area.

### 3 Be strong

It's crucial that observers have confidence in their task. This is demonstrated appropriately with respect for those around them and their opinions. Observations aren't audits! Being strong is about being assertive rather than aggressive – remember, the aim is to build relationships, foster agreement and drive improvement. So be direct about what you see, talk about specific issues, and use factual information. For example:

"I'm concerned to see that ..."

There have been six near misses involving this in the last two months ...

What is the safe way to operate this machine...?"

Remember that how we say something has a more powerful effect than the words we use, so be aware of your body language. Aim for a relaxed, at-ease posture but don't slouch. Keep your hands free. Don't fold your arms. Maintain eye contact when talking. Look interested and avoid distractions.

### 4 Focus

Use your plan to generate a clear picture of the outcome you intend for your observation. Pay attention to the way the discussion

moves forward, and be sure to bring it back on track if it drifts off. Open questions can help bring out the real issues, but closed questions with "yes" or "no" answers can help keep things on track.

Don't jump right in. Begin with small talk first, perhaps by showing a genuine interest in the person, asking about how long they have worked in the organisation or department, the nature of the product that's being made on the line, how the job is done, or even if they prefer the Bulls or the Sharks. Then move on to discuss safety.

On a recent observation visit, as part of a coaching session with a senior leader at a food factory in KwaZulu-Natal, I heard the following conversation:

Leader: "Hey, how's it going?"

Worker: "Uh, all good thanks."

Leader: "Got any safety issues around here?"

Worker: "No, everything's good."

Leader: "Ah, great! Okay thanks, see ya."

This "observation" lasted a total of 35 seconds. You can draw your own conclusions as to its impact and success. After a coffee and some discussion with the leader I was delighted to observe her next attempt:

Leader: "Hi, this looks interesting. What are the main safety risks in this job?"

Worker: "Well, the moving machinery, I suppose."

Leader: "Can you explain why, I'm not an expert on this particular process."

Worker: "Well the invert arm could come over and catch your hand if you're not careful."

Leader: "Right, so the invert arm could injure your hand?"

Worker: "Yes."

Leader: "Oh, right. So how do you stay safe?"

Worker: "We use this interrupt button to isolate the moving parts if we need to get into the machine. Shall I show you?"

This second dialogue continued for around five minutes, and culminated in a series of suggestions from the worker about how things could be improved. As we left the workplace, smiles were evident on the faces of both the leader and the worker.

### 5 Feedback

Finally, following up on observation visits is vital. If, during a conversation you identify and agree on actions to be taken, gain agreement with the worker on specific actions that need to be taken, by them and by you. Be sure that the necessary time is taken to organise these and make a point of returning to the work location to share updates with those who have raised the issues with you.

Think about how you can use the outcomes from your observations to share learnings more broadly across the organisation.

In his handy little book *The One Minute Manager*, Ken Blanchard encourages us to "catch the person doing something right". In conducting safety observations it's so easy to fall into the trap of doing the opposite though, and telling people what they've got wrong.

With every observation, try to find a positive action for which to thank your colleague. Not only will it break the ice, but it provides a great place to build further discussion from. **| SHEQ**



*Sharman on Safety* is a series of extracts that **SHEQ MANAGEMENT** is running this year, from Andrew Sharman's new book: *From Accidents to Zero: a practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture*. Andrew is an international member of the South African Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (SAIOSH) and chief executive of RyderMarshSharman - consultants on leadership and cultural excellence to a wide range of blue-chip corporates and non-government organisations globally. More at [www.rydermarshsharman.com](http://www.rydermarshsharman.com). **SHEQ MANAGEMENT** readers will receive 20 percent off the price of Sharman's book at [www.fromaccidentstozero.com](http://www.fromaccidentstozero.com) using the code **SHEQSA**.

# From Accidents to Zero

## A practical guide to improving your workplace safety culture

Thought-provoking and insightful. From Accidents to Zero progressively pushed me to see new connections, and new ways to address organisations' safety culture and risk management challenges.

**Mieke Jacobs, Global Practice Leader – Employee Safety, DuPont**

This A to Z of safety represents an eminently practical knowledge toolbox, one filled with tools which will add value to the CEO and the front line Safety Practitioner in equal measures. Relevant, accessible and applicable, this is safety distilled and a 'must-read'.

**Steven Brown, Brewery Manager, Heineken**

Read more at [www.fromaccidentstozero.com](http://www.fromaccidentstozero.com)

