

# THE BEHAVIOR- BASED SAFETY JOURNEY:

Roadblocks and  
Solutions That Engage  
Employees in Safety



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# More Than A Process

For nearly 40 years, behavior-based safety (BBS) has been engaging employees in organizational goals and helping push the enterprise beyond what was once thought possible. Over this time, BBS has also taken its lumps. But the science behind it has always been solid.

Behavior-based safety focused on identifying behaviors critical to safe work, determining where those behaviors are ineffective, uncovering why they have failed, and changing the system to support desired behaviors going forward.

Unfortunately, many BBS efforts have strayed from the science and succumbed to poor execution. They focus too narrowly on behavior and don't take into account exposure and environmental factors. They fail to engage supervisors and management in the process. And they don't align resources with the organization's objectives.

Today, we know a lot more about BBS and its role in engaging employees in safety. Advances in technology have made it less labor-intensive and have empowered us with tools in order to identify and eliminate hazards and exposures in real time. Its modern, integrated approach helps build resilient teams, stronger cultures, and greater collaboration.

The science is as strong as ever, and so is our understanding of how to execute it effectively. BBS is more than a process. It's a journey that engages workers and leaders in collaboration around safety improvement. Please join us as we press ahead on this path of safety improvement.



## The Long and Winding Road

Over time, BBS has hit many roadblocks. It's suffered from poor execution, overly lofty goals, and shortcuts that burden employees and undermine their motivation. Fortunately, we can learn from past mistakes and take steps to stay on course. Following are some common pitfalls that trip up traditional BBS efforts.



## Too narrow of a focus.

BBS systems focus exclusively on behavior. Behavior is of course critical, but it's only a piece of the puzzle. Exposure, hazard mitigation systems, organizational culture, leadership, and a host of other factors affect what happens on the front lines. Effective BBS systems address how all these elements come together at the working interface.

## An unprepared culture.

When strategy and culture collide, culture eats strategy for breakfast. BBS is rooted in observation and feedback. Unless the culture has a high level of trust, observations can stir up anxiety in the workforce that undercuts progress. Success requires leaders who can champion the process and assure people safety, not punishment, is the sole objective.

# When strategy and culture collide, culture eats strategy for breakfast.

## Renting instead of buying.

Some have used BBS systems for quick fixes (getting a 50% reduction in injury rates, for example) and then quit it. They didn't fully buy in and allow the process to have a real impact on culture and performance. This kills BBS and any future safety efforts, because it conditions the workforce to just go through the motions, waiting for the next burning leadership project to come down the pike.

## Treating it tactically.

Many organizations treat BBS as an hourly owned and operated process exclusively. Instead of it engaging all levels, only the front line takes responsibility, which ultimately dooms the journey and widens distrust between workers and leaders. If management does not take ownership of an initiative, it will not live.

## Absence of trust.

BBS depends on accurate data collection to address exposure before injury occurs. But if employees fear reprisal for reporting minor injuries and near misses, leaders will never get the information they need in order to take proactive measures. In an environment of distrust, workers are more afraid of punishment than of getting hurt.

## Resources and goals are misaligned.

For BBS to succeed, organizations should prioritize their goals and ensure that their resources are aligned to achieve them.

## Rushing a budding process.

For some organizations, the rush to get results fast takes out their legs before they really get going. Allow time for the organization to absorb BBS concepts and practices. It can take months (or longer) for people to really understand how to identify what is critical, define it, observe it, give feedback, and leverage that data to improve it.

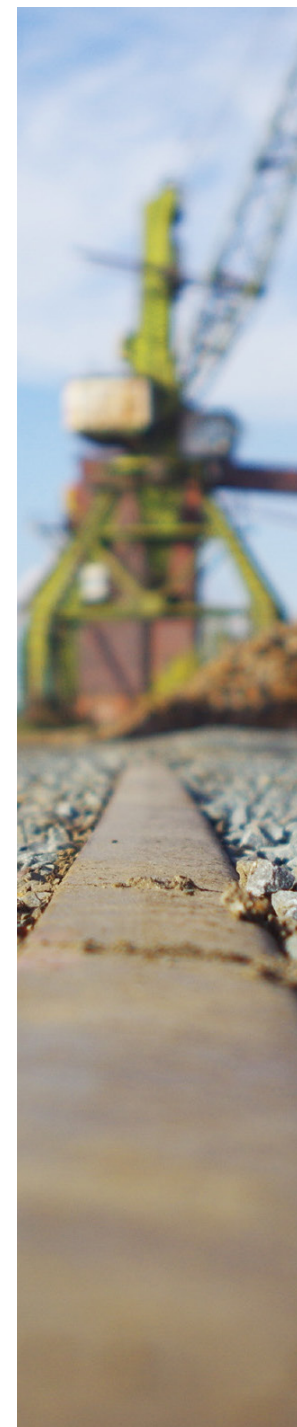
## Ignoring key stakeholders.

Often BBS fails because organizations exclude safety professionals from the process. The intention is to make front-line workers take ownership of the journey, not to rely on others to guide them. But when safety people are cut out, opportunities that could have changed procedures and system elements in support of BBS are lost.

## Data is not elevated to the right level.

Information and opportunity create change. Many BBS programs pigeonhole data with the hourly steering team, which, unfortunately, lacks the clout to effect change. This team often struggles to convince its superiors of the facts, because leaders have neither taken ownership of the process nor have they fully understood it.

Without the opportunity to make a difference, information dies on the vine.





## Getting Back to Basics

So, what can leaders do to avoid the pitfalls? To start, focus on foundations. BBS evolved from the marriage of two valid approaches: the behavioral sciences and Deming's quality movement. Together, they outlined four basic steps organizations could take to achieve specific goals in safety execution. These four steps provide a springboard for leaders to help their BBS processes reach their full potential.

## 1. Determine the most critical exposures contributing to injuries.

### **Exposures do not occur in a vacuum.**

They are part of how the organization functions. Exposures happen when hazards and people intersect. The goal of effective exposure control is installing reliable methods for keeping people and hazards separated. These methods include engineering controls, administrative controls, and physical barriers. Exposures are created when these methods fail or are unidentified.

### **Clearly identify at-risk actions.**

Beyond organizational influences, we want to target exposures immediately preceding an injury (e.g., falls and missteps—same or different level, personal contact, or struck against). Controlling these exposures is our most direct path to preventing them from creating future injuries.

### **Not all workplaces are the same.**

Critical controls must be tied directly to specific tasks and take into account the unique working customs of each organization. Generic lists produced from data across hundreds of companies do not have the specificity needed to be effective.

## 2. Define critical exposures to facilitate observations and feedback.

This can range from observing intersections of hazards and people to noting how observers communicate and encourage effective exposure control

### **Publicize the risks.**

Identify specific exposures that account for most injuries and ensure that the workforce recognizes them. Despite modern engineering fail-safes, understanding the intersection of hazards and people is still critical. We want to help people be aware of what they're doing and how to improve it.

### **Create measurable standards.**

Simply naming an exposure (such as “load moving horizontally”) is not enough. Leaders need to establish a standard that is both measurable and clearly defined so employees know exactly how to respond.

### **Clear expectations enable employees.**

The goal is to first determine the safest way an activity should be performed in order to protect front-line workers and then to communicate it so people know which exposures to avoid. They need to feel encouraged to work safely rather than ridiculed for failing to meet vague expectations.

## 3. Observe the working interface and how exposure is created when hazards and people intersect.

### **Gather actionable data.**

This means being on-site, taking snapshots of the work, and determining the level of success of keeping hazards and people apart. Success is defined by the protection of people against potential injury.

### **Use data for change.**

BBS is best when it produces valid information that feeds back into the system and fosters positive change in standards, procedures, and design. Observation data should always be a tool used for solving problems.

### **Create open dialogue about safety.**

Train people to engage in conversations about what is going on, why they did what they did (i.e., the rationale or causes behind their actions), and what can be done to improve safety performance. Build organizational fluency in talking about exposure and in identifying intersection points correctly where people and hazards may come together.

## 4. Analyze the data to identify opportunities to improve exposure control by changing the system.

### **Enable exposure control.**

Organizations can, unintentionally, hinder controlling exposure. Whether it's sending mixed messages about safety and production or storing PPE remotely from work areas, leaders must find ways to make it easier for employees to control exposure.

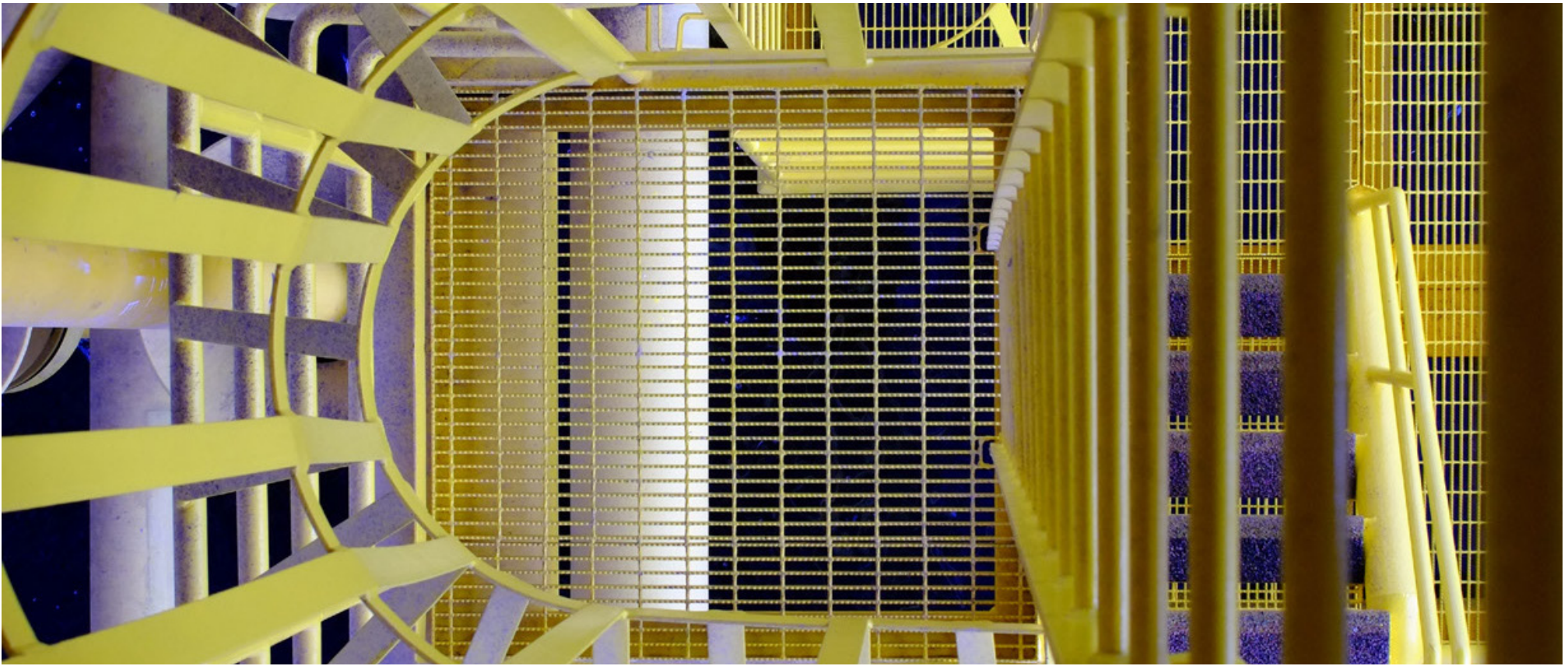
### **Cultivate a feedback-rich culture.**

When data is used to protect front-line employees rather than punish them for mistakes, they will be more open to receiving (and providing) feedback. This type of give-and-take is critical to making the changes to the system that will have a lasting impact.

### **Target exposure.**

As BBS evolved over time, its focus shifted to accommodate a broader view of injury causation. The focus aimed to change the system by eliminating exposure upstream. To be successful, it requires an organizational commitment from everyone.





## Building For Success

Behavior-based safety is an integral part of any high-functioning safety system. Executed effectively, it engages employees, builds teamwork, creates active and informed performance-improvement practices, provides leaders with data for decision making, and helps root out causes of incidents and near misses so they never happen again. Modern BBS transforms performance and creates meaningful change in culture, change that lasts and advances the enterprise beyond goals once thought unreachable. How effective BBS is, however, depends greatly on how it's executed. For BBS to continue to propel the organization forward, it must focus on the following areas:



## Don't stop at behavior.

Going forward, BBS must extend beyond behavior and encompass all aspects of the safety process. Leaders need to be engaged. Workers need to have the freedom to stop work to assess changes in exposure. Decision-makers need to be given data that is representative of the actual working conditions, understandable, and actionable. Communication needs to be open and free of reprisal. The quality of data and safety conversations should always be valued above quantity and meeting quotas.

## Redirect focus on exposure.

Exposure is always present. Because people's perspective of exposure to risk changes the longer they're in it, tolerance becomes subjective. What one person considers at-risk might not be the universal opinion. It's up to the organization to define what is acceptable

risk and what isn't. Through the combination of rules, standards, best practices, and training, organizations paint a clear picture of acceptable exposure. When an injury occurs, it's usually because exposure was allowed to rise above what these programs prescribe.

## Leverage a change-execution framework.

BBS must connect the leadership and workers to a consistent, sustainable value for identifying and keeping exposure in check. This means organizations should design a plan to achieve each of their objectives based on the environment and resources available. Depending on each organization's situation, success might take longer or it might require reordering the sequence of steps. Start with the goals and construct a process designed to realize them.

## Teach supervisors to do a critical behavior inventory.

Sometimes a full BBS implementation isn't within the organization's capability. In these cases, it's helpful for supervisors to sit down with workers once a week for 15 minutes to discuss incidents and get them to identify exposures and think through ways to prevent similar injuries. Record what they say and send salient information to engineers or other shareholders to act on.

## Embark on scenario interventions.

Gather safety professionals, managers, hourly workers, and supervisors to identify the obstacles that prevent people from stopping work when exposure changes and risk increases. Then create written scenarios that can be shared during safety briefings, and have teams work through those issues

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to identify opportunities to pause the job, assess exposure, and take steps to mitigate risk. Both engineering and procedural remedies can be identified through this process.

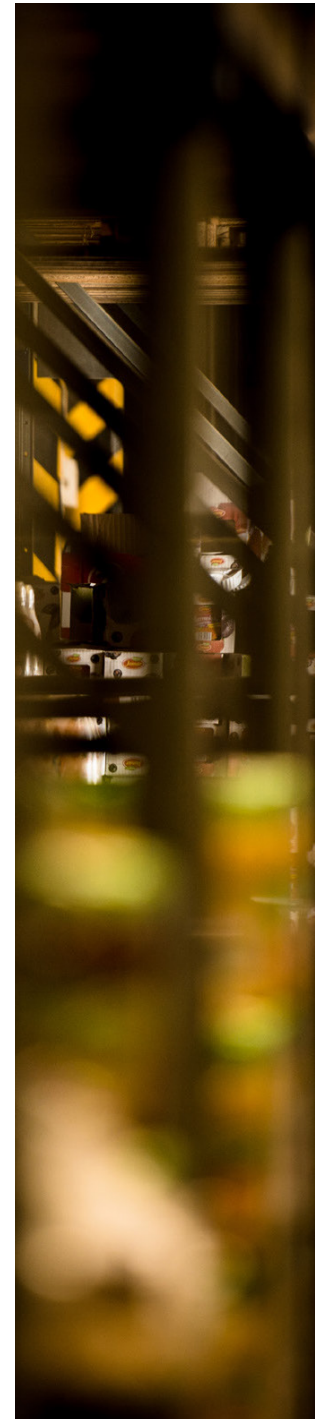
## Ensure no name, no blame.

When reporting is open and free of penalty, employees know that the organization values safety above all else. People are motivated to share safety concerns, disclose near-misses and incidents that reveal critical exposure data, and speak out to team members

working at risk, regardless of experience or perceived expertise.

## Make safety an all-organizational effort.

BBS is not authentic when leaders disown responsibility and expect workers to do all the heavy lifting. Without leadership knowledge of the process and without their support, workers can be left on an island, held accountable for safety even when its execution is outside their control. Leaders must enable and empower workers to do their jobs safely.



## THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

BBS is as strong today as the science that supports it. Effective systems don't just hand workers a check sheet with a list of safety-related behaviors to monitor. They engage everyone, from the general manager to the people on the front lines, with clearly defined roles that keep the process moving. They train supervisors and managers to understand what they do and say impact engagement in the process. Effective BBS systems also help them model desired behaviors, respond to employee concerns, and ensure that workers have what they need in order to work safely. Great BBS processes include safeguards to ensure anonymity and don't use safety information to punish employees for reporting incidents. And they continually evolve to incorporate new information around the practices and procedures that best advance safety through a behavior-based methodology.

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[www.dekra.us](http://www.dekra.us)

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