In the last newsletter, I shared the data collected from a group of 35 construction and maintenance contractors that used active behavior-based safety peer observation processes. In this article, I continue the topic with data from a different audience. The data presented in this paper come after the same discussion with attendees at the 2012 Behavioral Safety Now (BSN) conference.

After responding to questions and talking about the common problems with this group (same topics as in the last two sections of this paper), I asked the audience what they considered the biggest causal factor of the problems we had been discussing. The following graph presents the percentage of the audience of 70 participants that selected causal factors that contributed to the problems they experienced with BBS.

The most striking thing about these data is that attendees considered the lack of leadership support to be the single greatest common factor contributing to problems with their BBS process. (The “Other” category included many of the issues discussed in two previous papers: President’s Column: Common Problems with Behavioral Observations and Common Problems Part 2: Low Participation)

Leadership: The Greatest Common Cause

Several years ago, Aubrey Daniels presented a keynote at the Behavioral Safety Now Conference that was titled, “The Three R’s of Safety.” Readers familiar with Aubrey and his work can probably guess the three R’s: reinforcement, reinforcement, reinforcement. I suspect that too many in the audience completely misunderstood his point and interpreted Aubrey’s admonishment as implying that they should find ways to provide safety awards based on behavior. This interpretation, in fact, shows how much Aubrey is right. Most people do not understand the concept of reinforcement.

Conceptually, Aubrey is right. If people in your organization are not doing enough observations, what do you need to do to get them to do more? Answer: reinforce them for doing observations. If people are not turning in quality observations, how do we solve the problem? Answer: reinforce them for doing quality observations. If you have trouble getting people to volunteer to participate in a safety committee, how do we get them to participate? The answer, again, is to reinforce them for participating.

Of course, the devil is in the details. The problem is that the simple concept of reinforcement does not pinpoint what we must do to reinforce the various desired activities. Worse, the concept is easily misunderstood as endorsing some kind of tangible safety awards. To understand the application of the concept of reinforcement takes a little more knowledge of the empirical work in the field of leadership. Judi Komaki’s work suggests that effective leaders (those who get the best results) learn about what is going on by talking about it with their associates. In essence, they show what is important to them by what they ask about. When someone shows an interest in what we do, we find the interaction reinforcing. In short, we think the most critical activity for safety leaders is to review the activities related to safety, both formally (in meetings and reports) and informally through personal discussions.
Visible Safety Leadership

Research by Dominic Cooper (2006) suggests that leaders need to engage in some visible safety-related activity every week. In general, 65 percent of the BBS participants at BSN reported that their leadership took some visible action related to safety every week.

These data also suggest that 35 percent of the participants believe their organizations have room for improving the level of visible leadership support for safety.

Pulling It All Together

The challenge to addressing almost all of the problems discussed throughout this series is ensuring a laser-like alignment of visible actions that are aimed at addressing the issue you are targeting for improvement. Whether it is the quality of observations or level of participation, the goal is to ensure that leaders at each level of the organization are all studying and discussing what their direct reports are doing to address that single issue. Reinforcement occurs naturally in the context of those discussions, even if the participants do not know the concept of reinforcement! So, if your top BBS issue is quality of the observations, a senior leader might invite the safety committee chair to participate in a leadership staff meeting and provide an update on how the committee is assessing quality and what they are doing to improve it. The leader might also ensure that action plans and progress reports are shared with employees to show the importance of the information gathered through observations. Furthermore, that leader might also talk with direct reports about what they are doing to encourage employees to record quality information on their checklist. And, at the next level, supervisors might be asking employees about the kind of things they are seeing during their safety observations, perhaps even having the employees discuss critical observations during pre-shift safety briefings. In other words, attention to behaviors related to the target issue should cascade down through the organization without significant drift or loss of focus.

The earlier two segments of this series President’s Column: Common Problems with Behavioral Observations and Common Problems Part 2: Low Participation) suggested a variety of strategies for addressing some of the most common problems with BBS observations. The real secret, however, is to have a safety team and a leadership team that are willing to study their BBS efforts, find appropriate solutions for their issues, and review the behaviors critical to those solutions.