



# RESOURCE NEWSLETTER



## **BEYOND BEHAVIOR-BASED SAFETY** *Why Traditional Safety Practices are No Longer Enough*

Traditional safety management practices are built on the assumption that human behavior is rational and occurs primarily through conscious decision-making. Nothing could be further from the truth. We are, in fact, irrational by nature, creatures of habit and deeply influenced by past experiences. To create the next step change in the practice of occupational safety, we must revisit existing paradigms defining it, revise them to better align with research emerging from advancements in neuroscience, and adapt to practice realigned strategies of an affective nature.

### **IRRATIONAL BY NATURE**

In 2016, a municipality experienced a fatality when a maintenance worker entered a confined space containing lethal atmospheric conditions. The victim, a father of two young children, entered an underground vault to take a pipe measurement. As the final investigation revealed, and for reasons unknown, the victim chose not to initiate a permit required for the entry and did not test the space for atmospheric conditions prior to entering it.

By all accounts, this tragic event should never have happened. Less than one month prior to his death, the employee had taken and completed a very thorough confined space training course. Not only had he demonstrated understanding of the content and material, but he also mastered it, scoring 100% on the test. The individual involved was regarded as a great employee and was well-respected by his supervisors and peers alike. He was fully aware of the potential hazards associated with confined space entry and the precautions necessary for the work he was performing.



In addition, he was experienced in performing the tasks he had been assigned and had readily available the tools and equipment needed to identify the hazards inside the space that ultimately claimed his life. While all the ingredients for a successful outcome were in place, one critical decision set into motion a spiraling set of circumstances with grave consequences.

This scenario, in one form or another, repeats itself all too often. Employees routinely engage in seemingly mindless behaviors that in retrospect tend to defy all logic and reason, as was the case with the referenced victim. He clearly understood the requirements and necessary precautions for entering a permit-required confined space. And yet it wasn't enough.

### **DRIVEN BY FEELINGS**

One of the most profound achievements occurring over the past 50 years involves a greatly improved understanding of tendencies in human behavior. Made possible through advancements in brain imaging, neuroscientists can now explain through quantifiable and objective data the primary basis of real-time decision-making. Their findings? Most decisions and subsequent actions are largely emotional, not logical. *(Continued, Page 2)*

(Continued,) The implications of this discovery have profoundly impacted consumer marketing. A growing number of products and services are advertised with the intent of reaching the heart, not the head. A classic example involves marketing efforts for prescription medications. A recent study found that approximately 95% of direct-to-consumer (DTC) ads use emotional appeals. How effective are they? Medications involved in DTC campaigns are prescribed nine times more frequently than those that are not. This application of science to market and sell prescription drugs to consumers is so effective, it's banned in all but two countries around the globe – the United States and New Zealand.

The same body of research used to grow sales can be used to improve workplace safety. Whereas historical approaches have focused on sharing information to convey knowledge, the real opportunity for significant improvement involves shifting perspectives. It doesn't involve more rules or procedures or additional hours of training in a chalk-and-talk classroom setting. To achieve the next step change in safety, we must connect with employees on an emotional level and ultimately change how they feel about at-risk behaviors.

### ***MOST OFTEN ON AUTOPILOT***

Another significant advancement emerging from behavioral research in the recent past involves a dual process theory. In short, this theory accounts for our ability to process thoughts and information in two fundamentally very different ways. One occurs subconsciously and is characterized as being implicit and automatic. The other occurs consciously and is characterized as being explicit and controlled.



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The implications of this collective and growing body of research are monumental to the practice of safety. Whereas we've failed to fully recognize the role of emotions in decision-making, we've also missed the mark regarding the degree of conscious awareness associated with most behaviors.

In reality, we operate on autopilot far more than we may realize and are fully aware of only a very small percentage of what's going on around us at any given point in time.

To put this into some sort of perspective, we must recognize both the capacity and limitations of our ability to process information. The human brain can process up to 11 million bits of information every second. Our conscious mind, however, can handle only 40 to 50 bits of information a second.

*(Continued, Page 3)*

## **INTRINSICALLY MOTIVATED**

The tenets of behavior-based safety (BBS) vary but can most often be distilled into three key elements. One, organizations must effectively set and convey expectations regarding workplace behaviors. Two, they must implement a means of conducting routine observations to ensure compliance with standardized work practices. And three, they must engage with employees to reinforce or modify behaviors based on observation results.

## **SUBJECT TO PERSUASION**

The next frontier in safety is leadership-dependent and influence-oriented. It's about reaching and connecting with employees on an emotional level. It requires shifting how employees feel about at-risk behaviors, as much as or perhaps more so than trying to change what they may think about them. In practice, this requires increasing perceived levels of risk and/or decreasing anticipated gains associated with at-risk behaviors. Developing skills in frontline leadership for those routinely interacting with employees is the key to moving forward. It's also a critical first step for those wanting to move beyond traditional safety management practices and plateaued performance levels.



## **Friday Safety Tip of the Day**

### **LINE OF FIRE**

*A simple definition of “line of fire” is being in harm’s way.*

*Line of fire injuries occur when the path of a moving object or the release of hazardous energy intersects with an individual’s body.*

*There are many examples of line of fire hazards in a given workplace.*

*Three major categories of line of fire hazards include:*

- 1. Caught-In or between*
- 2. Struck by*
- 3. Release of hazardous energy*

*The most common for the electric utility industry include:*

- Electricity*
- Objects under tension*



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