

Breaking the Cycle of Risky Behavior

Certified safety professional Gary Higbee has amassed decades of experience in the field but he's the first to admit he isn't beyond taking risks himself. No one is.

The president and CEO of an Iowa-based safety, environmental and business consulting firm, Higbee tells the story of his wife purchasing an unassembled tricycle for their grandson and asking him to assemble it well before the boy arrived for his birthday celebration.

“When you change a light bulb in your dining room, we probably all know you should go out into the garage and get the stepladder and move the (dining room) table, but usually you just stand on a chair. We get away with it for the most part,” says Higbee.

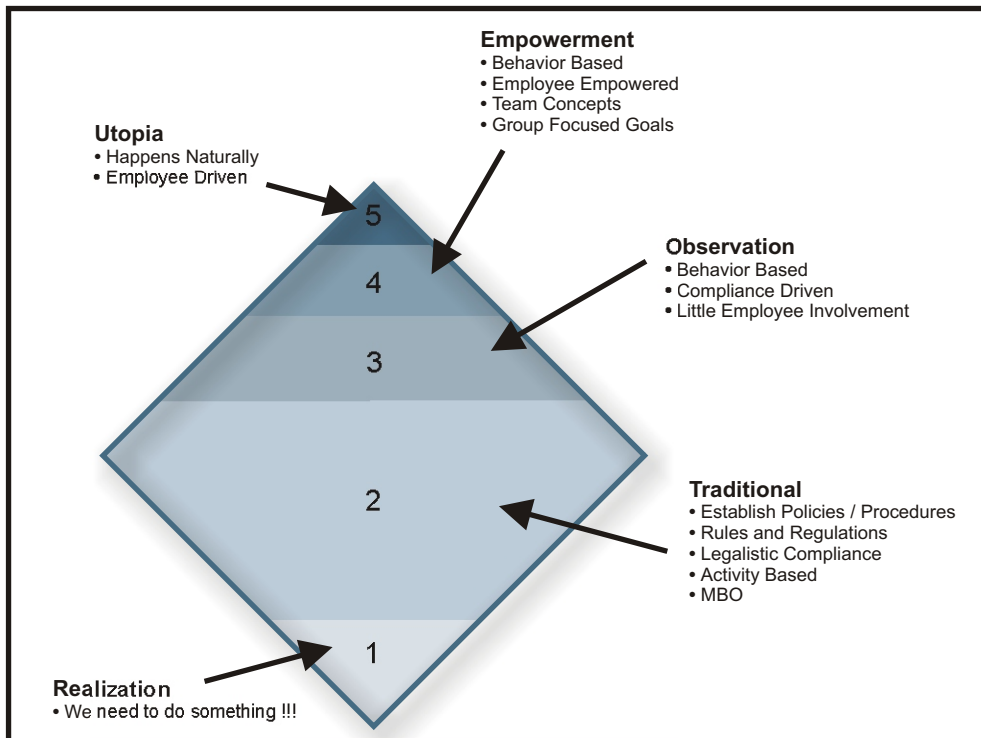
That type of behavior is reinforced every time a risk is taken without incident, whether it's cutting the lawn in sandals or standing on the top rung of a ladder in the workplace.

employee told him: “I don't know what happened. I've been doing this job for 20 years and I've never been hurt before.” The truth is, we almost always hurt ourselves (as a result of our actions). Things don't break very often. Car brakes don't go out very often, and other people don't hurt us very often, although it does happen.

A traditional safety program attempts to eliminate, or at least drastically reduce the potential for injury, through a combination of employee training and engineering controls, including machine guards and barriers. Behavior-based safety takes matters a step further through a process of observing workers and telling them when they are doing the wrong (unsafe) or right thing. Over time, people will develop 'habit strength' for example, by buckling up without even thinking about it when getting into a car.

“Those techniques work very well when we don't introduce any other factors, like being tired, frustrated or in a hurry,” he says.

But what happens to the normally careful driver who sleeps through an alarm and is running 15 minutes late for work? Chances are good he's tailgating, cursing and speeding. The same situation frequently occurs in the workplace itself.



Thinking “how hard can it be?”, Higbee put the task off until minutes before the family was scheduled to arrive. As it turned out, the process was more complicated than he'd thought. Rushing against the clock, Higbee felt a stinging pain as a screwdriver slipped from its mark and found the palm of his hand. He often tells that story during safety presentations.

“That's the frustration of working in safety. You are trying to get people to do things properly, but they have been doing things improperly for so long and getting away with it that they are not likely to change,” he says.

Higbee, who managed a safety program for John Deere and Co. and Maytag, says he'd be rich if he had a dollar for every time an injured

“When you introduce rushing into the work environment, the machine is down, you haven't been able to make parts all morning, the customers are waiting, all of a sudden we begin to work outside of traditional or behavior-based safety program guidance.”

The more states a worker gets into (rushing, fatigue, frustration and/or

complacency), the more critical errors he or she stands to make.

“Wouldn't it be better if we could learn to trigger on the state? If we know we are in a hurry and frustrated, we need to step back, take a deep breath and say, 'Hey, I'm going to get hurt doing this.'” Higbee calls this taking-a-step-backward approach “advanced safety awareness”.

Higbee also describes what he believes to be five elements of a world-class safety organization. They are:

1. Recognition by a company that it must do more to prevent injuries and illnesses. That awareness might come through high workers' compensation premiums, OSHA citations, or the fact a plant has a hard time attracting new employees because it has developed a reputation as an unsafe place to work.
2. Focusing on traditional safety program measures, including written safety policies and procedures, and employing engineering controls to separate employees from dangerous machinery and hazardous processes.
3. Introducing an observation process, with input from management and workers alike, to watch out for unsafe acts. Higbee says workers observed committing unsafe acts should not be disciplined, but rather spoken to about how to correct unsafe behaviors.
4. Encouraging workers on the floor to accompany supervisors and safety managers on observation rounds. “Safety should truly be a teamwork process,” says Higbee. Workers will appreciate being given a chance to have their input heard.
5. Once the other four steps are in place and working smoothly, employees will automatically look out for one another, instead of ignoring the unsafe practices of their co-workers.

About Gary Higbee, EMBA, CSP

Gary has an MBA from the University of Iowa and is a board certified safety professional and he is currently working towards a Ph.D. in Industrial Technology. In 1993 he received the Safety Professional of the Year award for region IV of the American Society of Safety Engineers. He is considered an expert in Traditional and Behavior Based Safety Technologies as well as Organizational Change. Using his over 37 years of experience and a sense of humor Gary has become a nationally known speaker on safety, health, environmental and business issues.

