

# Progressive Discipline and Behavior Based Safety

How do you handle compliance and discipline issues that are observed during behavior-based safety observations?

By Larry Wilson

This is not a difficult question if you're running an employee driven (peer-to-peer) observation process because none of the observers have either the authority to discipline or the willingness to report. So it's a non-issue, which is why many companies and corporations favor this type of process.

Where it gets tricky is if you're running a top-down, supervisor-based observation process, in which case legal or corporate mandates may require progressive discipline. Obviously, it's a lot harder to get employees enthusiastic about this type of process. Telling them, "But it's for your own good..." will hardly improve things. Yet the company or contractor may need this type of process, either to get a handle on compliance or to satisfy the requirements of the company or corporation they're doing the work for.

Without employee buy-in, the potential benefits of a behavior based safety process are very limited indeed. However, with employee buy-in, in terms of percentage, this type of process will reduce recordable injuries, especially lost time, very dramatically. Injury reductions of 50% or more within a year are common – but only if the employees support the process. Unfortunately for some companies, the discipline hurdle caused them to stumble. For others, it caused them to fall flat on their face. But for those who thought it through – they managed to take it in stride. They told

their workforce there would be **no discipline** taken based on a planned observation unless it was a blatant, willful and deliberate unsafe act that endangered the lives of others (which – if you looked at their discipline records – would probably be the only ones they had).

In other words, the **perception** that they would "back off" on discipline wasn't going to change the real status quo anyway.

From an employee point of view, this is (usually) acceptable. They don't want other employees endangering their lives either. However, they don't want to see their friends and co-workers fired or sent home for minor infractions.

Besides the discipline issue, another key factor in terms of making a top-down process successful, is to make sure that some "visible" improvements happen as a result of the observations. Ergonomic improvements or even comfort improvements as well as quicker resolution of unsafe conditions are all good examples of visible improvements. But whatever you do, it's very important that the employees feel that some "good" is coming from the observations – not just some "bad" potential.

Another important thing to keep in mind is that top-down processes are hard to sustain over a five to ten year period. While they may be necessary at the beginning – because it's very

difficult to ask employees to correct situations that supervisors walk by or ignore – eventually you want everyone involved. Typically, the more people that participate, the lower the injury rate. Obviously, it will be next to impossible to get the employees to participate if they think their participation might get someone in trouble or even if they think the process is more negative than positive.

However, once you get past compliance issues (rules and regulations), it's not likely that you will have a total recordable rate less than 2. If you're serious about continuous improvement and you'd like to get to zero (or very close to it), you'll need **everyone** participating. It's important that you don't shoot yourself in the foot, right from the start, by mishandling the discipline issue.

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**Compliance**  
Magazine

This article originally appeared in January 2001 Issue of Compliance Magazine.

