

SSU 2006-02

## Identifying & Correcting Unsafe Employee Attitudes & Behavior

*By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control*

**E**ighty percent of all accidents occur because of unsafe employee acts. Behind those acts you sometimes find an indifferent attitude, inattention or someone in a hurry. Your company can have the very best safety program in place, but if your employees do not “buy-in” to safety and consistently practice safety rules, it’s likely that the program will be ineffective.

Without question, the most important things supervisors can do to prevent accidents are to observe, counsel and correct employees who behave unsafely on the job. This process goes beyond reprimanding or blaming. It includes attempts to influence attitudes, which may eventually change behavior. Changing the behavior of adults is not an easy task, so let's try to understand why employees do unsafe or reckless things.

### What Kinds Of Attitudes And Behaviors Are Major Factors In Accident Causation?

**An alert & effective leader will observe changes in an employee's attitude, behavior and work quality.**

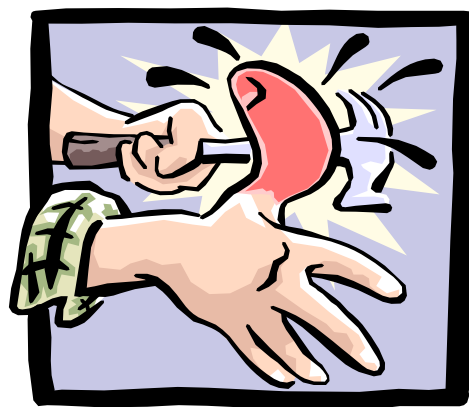
- **Past Experiences** - Some employees “have been doing it this way for 20 years” and refuse to give up their old bad habits. The saying, “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” may or may not be true, but old habits can lead to accidents in the long run. Past ability to “beat the odds” may prevent some people from seeing current hazards.
- **Displays of Manhood** - A few “macho” types like to display their strength by lifting heavy objects carelessly or doing a task without the use of required safety equipment. This “show-off” behavior can, and often does, result in an injury.
- **Casual Choices** - In dangerous jobs, employees typically work safely. They know if they choose unsafe behavior in that type of situation, they will probably get injured. However, in normal, run-of-the-mill jobs, because of boredom and repetition, workers may choose to forsake safety and take chances.
- **Seeking Approval** - In work groups, some employees have a need to seek approval from others in their group by doing a dangerous or foolish act. Examples include riding on moving equipment or working at high elevations without required fall protection equipment. They believe this will bring them admiration.

- **Insecurity** - Employees concerned about their job security sometimes try to work faster or take chances which puts them at higher risk for injury. For example: an employee may rapidly unload a truck to gain his supervisor's approval for getting the job done quickly. This employee may also suffer a severe back injury in the process.
- **Following The Crowd** - Some individuals let others in the work group do their thinking for them. What you hear is, "Everyone else does it that way!" It's easier to base your own behavior upon others, than to do the right thing and risk standing out. Attitudes, like behavior, are contagious!
- **Personal Problems** - Issues not related to the workplace can be major factors in accident causation. Employees may worry about family, financial or health related issues and may not concentrate on their job at all times, putting them at higher risk for injury. Most workers have at least temporary periods of higher-than-normal stress in their lives. Younger workers may have different stresses than workers in their 40s and 50s. Another example of temporary stress is the distraction, haste, financial worry that occurs in December during the holiday season. These stresses, if not dealt with effectively, can result in higher absenteeism, reduced productivity, lower work quality and costly accidents.
- **Job-Related Conflicts** - Negative attitudes toward co-workers or immediate supervisors, lack of support, and conflicting demands are all potential distractions from safe job performance. Sometimes these situations are difficult to change and may require a job reassignment.

In some cases, a combination of the above issues may be effect an employee. An alert and effective leader will observe changes in an employee's attitude, behavior and work quality. Carelessness, inattention and stupidity are not causes; they are symptoms. The key to success in helping them change their behavior is a firm, but sincere and positive approach.

### What Can You Do To Control Unsafe Attitudes And Behavior?

- Ensure that the physical environment is safe.** Make the workplace as safe as possible through adequate guarding, grounding, processes, equipment, etc. It's easier to control the work environment than to change human nature, so work on that first.
- Keep lines of communication open to all employees.** Take time to listen to employee concerns and problems. It is not your job to serve as a personal counselor, but if the problems are job related, you can often do something about them. If the employee is in a high-hazard job, you may need to transfer him or her to a new position until the personal problems are resolved. When major personal problems do appear to exist, urge the employee to consult a counselor or personnel in the company's Employee Assistance Program. In either case, if you're a good listener, employees will feel supported and may arrive at a sound course of action, or a better attitude, on their own.
- Try to identify the negative attitudes behind an employee's unsafe acts.** Keep an open mind about employees attitudes and motives. You may not agree with them--but try to understand them. If you know what is driving their behavior, you can use the best approach to changing it. Psychologists say we can't change people's attitudes, but as supervisor, you can change *how* they work. Your strategy should involve knowledge of the unsafe situation and a firm, organized approach to leadership and constructive training.



- D. **Demonstrate that safe work practices are a “condition of employment.”** Do this by making it very clear *beforehand* what you expect. Presenting safety policies, procedures and work rules in writing to all employees during new employee orientation is a must. Show employees that you, as a supervisor, follow these policies. Review safe work practices during periodic safety meetings, and consistently *correct* any unsafe work practices you observe.

## Strategies To Correct Unsafe Employee Acts

To really make a difference in changing an employee’s safety behavior, they must be convinced that working safely is the *only* way to work and that it will benefit them in the long run. For a permanent correction of unsafe acts, you must get the employee’s “buy-in” to work safety. This process starts with a constructive interview in a private setting, as soon as possible after the unacceptable behavior was observed. The first rule to a successful change must be your commitment to focus on the *unsafe act* rather than scolding or blaming the employee. The following steps are guidelines to follow:

**For a permanent correction of unsafe acts, you must get the employee’s “buy-in” to work.**

- 1. Point out what you observed and your concern about it.** Come to a mutual agreement with the employee as to what the unsafe act or incident was (for example, not wearing fall protection or smoking near flammables.) Get the employee to talk and share his/her feelings about the incident. Also address **near misses**. A near miss may be a precursor to a real incident in the future. Encourage employees to discuss near misses and share them with the work group.
- 2. Try to get employees to re-think the situation.** Give the employee chance to see the unsafe act or error in terms of what they might have done differently. Try to provide insight on how they may have worked hastily or made the wrong choice. Encourage them to make suggestions if they know of a better, safer way to do things. Your goal is their *buy-in* for a better way to do things.
- 3. Acknowledge, but do not excuse stressful situations.** If you are aware of personal circumstances that may have caused distraction and contributed to an error, you may wish to acknowledge this, and express empathy. Make it clear, however, that safe work behaviors are a *condition of employment*, whatever problems a person may have. Otherwise, an injury or fatality could become an added, unwelcome problem.
- 4. Take reasonable steps to help the situation, if possible.** This will increase your employee’s loyalty and personal effort to make needed changes. If the personalities of two crew members clash—as happens sometimes—try to put them in separate work groups, and everyone will work better and safer. If a co-worker is partly to blame for workplace tension, speak to him or her as well.

When unsafe behavior seems to be the result of personal, family or financial problems, make a referral to counseling or get the personnel department involved. When necessary, for the safety of the employee and co-workers, send the person home until the stress has been at least reduced, if not eliminated.

If there is a lack of understanding or training, provide or arrange for the training. Try working the employee alongside a more experienced employee, with a good safety record, for a while. Sometimes the best way for people to learn is to *teach*, so try giving the worker written information about the safety topic and having him or her conduct the next safety meeting.

5. **Come to an agreement on what needs to be done.** For example, demonstrate correct body position or proper use of tools and equipment. Then ask them to demonstrate what they understand. Finally, ask for a *commitment* to follow safe work practices in the future. Clinch their commitment by challenging, “Can I count on you for that?”
6. **Observe and follow up.** Make provisions for follow-up within the next 30 days or so. In the meantime, don’t breathe down your employee’s neck, but keep an eye out to see that the behavior has changed favorably, and give “strokes” if it has. “Behavior that gets rewarded, gets repeated!”
7. **Document all of your discussions and training with the employee.** If the individual continues to work unsafely after this process, progressive discipline is appropriate, and documentation is critical.

## CONCLUSION

The key to an effective safety program is employee buy-in and involvement. You must go beyond the fault-finding and scolding approach if you want to truly change unsafe employee behavior. Spend the time necessary to learn what motivates your employees and why they have unsafe habits. Use this insight so that when you meet to discuss the issue, you’ll sound more like a coach than a sergeant. Give them every chance to work safely, give them “strokes” for doing so, and be firm with your corrections when necessary.

Give your employee’s every chance to work safely.