

Hazard Observations: 6 Q&As with the National Safety Council's John Dony

In August 2016 [Pro-Sapien released the results of research into hazard observations](#). Although the study was of a small sample (n=51), there were a number of interesting findings – namely around Behavior Based Safety, workforce engagement, reporting targets and whether the initiative is a lagging or leading indicator. Rather than be satisfied with our own analysis, we spoke to Director of EHS&S and The Campbell Institute at the [National Safety Council](#), John Dony to give us his thoughts on main issues that our research highlighted.

Based in the U.S., the NSC is relied on by more than 55,000 companies throughout the country for information, resources and training. The Campbell Institute is the NSC's research branch, established to discover proven and practical methods to improve the environment, health and safety of employees and communities.

Here's what John had to say about the practice of hazard observations.

Behavior Based Safety

Behavior Based Safety (BBS) is a widely debated initiative. Some argue that it wrongly encourages blame culture, whilst others add that in order for BBS to be successful, safety culture has to be strong in the first place. The concept is to involve employees, force management to put its money where its mouth is, and focus on the human side of safety. As one respondent put it, *"it's a very proactive way of culture nurturing to avoid near-misses and actual accidents."*

What are your thoughts on Behavior Based Safety? Have you come across it before in practice and what were the results?

I've seen many examples of Behavior Based Safety (BBS) programs done well – and other examples of BBS programs still maturing and gaining traction. It's a challenging program to implement for a number of reasons, but one that can be very successful if given room to develop. To me, the most important aspects of BBS programs to get right are simplicity, action, trust and ownership. By simplicity, I mean that any observation form that takes more than about a minute to fill out is likely to make people feel administratively burdened, and turn the BBS program into a paper chase – so make it short and sweet. By action, I mean that something must be done with the data collected (in aggregate) through the program – simply counting observation numbers is not enough. By trust, I mean that BBS program observations should be detached from discipline or retributive action - BBS programs that are blame-based are ineffective at best and problematic at worst. Finally, by ownership I mean that whether your BBS program is off-the-shelf or homegrown, workers should have meaningful representation in and control over how the initiative is developed and led.

Engagement

This is probably the biggest topic that came up through our research. Most of our respondents had experienced obstacles in getting their workforce on-board. Hazard Observations are generally down to those on the ground to report, so without engagement you've got no initiative. John makes a

good point that it is not just employees that need to be encouraged – it is contractors and leaders too.

Have you experienced challenges in engaging employees in the past? Our respondents indicated that the main issues lie in safety culture and avoidance.

Who hasn't experienced challenges in engagement? I think that the focus on employee engagement is actually a bit too narrow, and would broaden it to worker engagement (including contractors) as well as leadership engagement (including site- and corporate-level). In many cases, and I think with respect to BBS programs in particular, there is a tendency for organizations to take on an initiative because they see other organizations doing it successfully. With BBS, if the maturity of the EHS culture isn't yet to the point where workers at all levels feel comfortable having open conversations and intervening when they see something, the program will face serious challenges. Many organizations start with a penthouse program when what they really need is a foot in the door when it comes to engagement.

Reporting targets

What are your thoughts on reporting targets and incentives? 55% of our respondents have targets in place, but only 33% use incentives for meeting those targets.

This is an issue that a lot of organizations struggle with and to some degree I think it depends on the risk profile of the activities being performed. It might be appropriate to target a certain number of hazards identified per week or month when you work in a very high-risk industry; if you work in an office setting, not so much. My observation is that the more stringent the quota you set, the lower the overall quality of data you will receive. One also needs to be cognizant of the fact that if your program is successful, you'll be driving down exposure and should expect to see a gradual decline in the number of identified hazards (following a multiple-year spike in hazard identification as the program launches). It's easy to get caught up in the trend without paying attention to what the actual observations are telling you – this is the trap you need to avoid.

Leading vs. lagging indicators

Now this topic is not limited to hazard observations, nor is it only relevant in EHS. We discuss hazard observations as a leading indicator in our findings after one respondent pointed out that, in his experience, the benefits of hazard observations are difficult to communicate to the workforce. The respondent referred to HazObs as a lagging indicator; however, it is widely accepted that they are in fact a very useful leading indicator.

What are the benefits of leading indicators? Do you think hazard observations are a good way to drive performance improvement?

There are many benefits. The Campbell Institute has actually performed extensive research on the topic. If I had to pick one benefit that trumps the rest, it would be that the use of leading indicators drives a different type of conversation in the organization, especially at the leadership level, if you can gain the right traction for the program. Moving away from "What was our lost time rate?" or "Why was that recordable?" towards "What was the potential for someone to get seriously injured or killed?" or "Do we truly understand the causes that caused that to happen?" is the single most

important shift an organization can make. Hazard observations are a good way to drive performance improvement, yes, but can't be utilized in a vacuum. Leading indicators should be used as part of a suite of KPIs, inclusive of key lagging indicators, to help provide an organization with the best sense of direction.

Safety culture

The golden ticket! Safety culture is an explosive topic within EHS – according to OSHA, “developing strong safety cultures have the single greatest impact on incident reduction of any process.” Shared beliefs and values between management and workforce are the core to an organization’s safety culture, where everyone – from shop-floor to top-floor – contributes to the wellbeing of all. A strong safety culture is not achieved overnight, however; it takes effort, usually encouraged by management as a top-down initiative. Core to creating this culture of shared responsibility is developing the management-workforce relationship.

How can EHS leaders build a good relationship with their employees to strengthen safety culture?

More so than anything else, EHS leaders need to be strong in two areas to build good relationships and strengthen culture: communication and follow-through. These softer-side skills are just as important to the EHS profession as the technical/engineering side of the coin. If we cannot be visible, passionate, and engaged ourselves, how can we expect our workers to be? Likewise, if we implement a program and never close the loop on actions taken as a result of observations or other requested actions, we risk becoming the “person who gives us more work” and not the “person who cares about us.”

Challenges in the future

What is the main challenge going forward in hazard observations / employee engagement?

I think that the biggest challenge will always be perseverance. As in any other field, we must balance fighting fires with pursuing long-term strategies. We must also avoid getting distracted with flavor of the month initiatives. BBS, hazard observation programs, and worker engagement takes time. The best EHS cultures weren't built in a day or even a year. We can't get frustrated by an early lack of results. One last challenge we must pay attention to is true involvement of workers at all levels. It's tempting to try to put a program on your back as an EHS professional and make it work – but it will be a thousand times more effective if you can find a grassroots leader who truly cares about it and is willing to get involved. Spend time seeking these champions out!

[The survey's findings are summarized here.](#)

It's clear that hazard observations are considered a useful exercise within high-risk industries, and to get the results you need to drive performance improvement, a positive relationship between management and the workforce is key.

Make sure you are giving your employees, contractors and even members of the public the tools they need to report what they see – [join an upcoming demo to discover how to boost engagement by utilizing SharePoint's familiar interface for hazard observations.](#)

About John Dony



John Dony is director of the Campbell Institute, the global environmental, health and safety center of excellence. Mr. Dony sets Institute vision and strategy, develops leading-edge research, and oversees event, partnership and outreach initiatives. He works closely with EHS&S and operations executives, as well as thought leaders from more than 40 member organizations and partners to share best practices from around the world.

Mr. Dony also serves as director of EHS&S at the National Safety Council. In this role, he is responsible for the development and continuous improvement of the Council's EHS&S management system and associated programs, supporting more than 500 employees in the United States and abroad. He also works closely with the National Safety Council Executive Team to inform NSC EHS&S-related workplace strategy, vision and messaging.

About Pro-Sapien

Pro-Sapien specializes in SharePoint and Office 365, providing tailored Environmental, Health, Safety and Quality (EHSQ) management software for some of the world's largest organizations. Developed with high risk and heavily regulated sectors in mind, Pro-Sapien's award-winning HSEQ Innovate software harnesses the Microsoft SharePoint or Azure/Office 365 based platforms to support business processes, manage forms and produce reports.

With an international client base, the Pro-Sapien team works across a number of sectors including engineering, oil and energy, financial services and health. For additional information about Pro-Sapien, or to request a demonstration of their HSEQ Innovate software, please visit www.pro-sapien.com.