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Behavioral safety programs help employers cut workers comp costs

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Sheena Harrison (<mailto:smharrison@businessinsurance.com>)

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Private and public sector employers are implementing behavior-based safety programs in their workplaces to cut workers compensation costs, using feedback and reinforcement to encourage safer work habits of their employees.



Behavioral safety programs, a decades-old regimen to reduce workplace injuries, are finding greater success when employees and top company executives participate in the effort.

Contemporary programs focus on a “conversation rather than observation” approach, in which employees can give feedback to managers and are not blamed solely for a company's safety concerns, said Robert Pater, managing director and founder of Strategic Safety Associates Inc. in Portland, Ore.

They also allow employees to voluntarily participate in observations and safety conversations. That combined with a commitment by top executives to provide safe facilities and equipment for employees can help companies see the greatest success, he said.

“The best implementations are not only top-down driven; they have significant input and buy-in from employees and supervisors,” Mr. Pater said.

Workplace safety experts say such programs work best when used as one tool in a series of safety protocols rather than a stand-alone cure for all safety challenges. The most effective programs engage workers in safer behaviors that prevent accidents.

Companies should use behavioral safety programs to improve employee adherence to safety rules, and to measure whether they provide resources and infrastructure that allow employees to work safely, Mr. Pater said.

“To me, the most important thing is that leaders look at themselves and they start acknowledging, “Where is my part in this?” Mr. Pater said.

Daniel J. Moran, a behavioral psychologist and Joliet, Ill.-based senior vice president of Quality Safety Edge Inc., said his company estimated behavioral safety programs can reduce injury rates by more than 30% on average in the first year and by more than 90% by their eighth year.

Observation and feedback, part of the five key pieces of behavioral safety programs, are particularly crucial, Mr. Moran said. In these stages, trained observers provide positive, discipline-free feedback to their co-workers and discuss how safety can be improved. Such steps can reinforce positive work habits.

Giving positive responses for safe behaviors are important because unsafe work habits sometimes can be easier for workers, Mr. Moran said during a recent joint meeting of the Risk & Insurance Management Society Inc. and the American Society of Safety Engineers in Oak Brook, Ill.

“What’s happening is taking (unsafe) safety shortcuts lets us get things done faster (or) easier sometimes,” Mr. Moran said. “It’s less expensive to do it that way. “

Behavioral safety has helped significantly decrease injury rates for Knife River Corp. of Bismarck, N.D., and reduced its workers compensation rates to its lowest in 10 years.

Elsewhere, the city of Henderson, Nev., began using E. I. du Pont de Nemours & Co.’s behavioral safety program in its parks and recreation department in 2009. The department has some 1,700 full- and part-time employees, most of whom are seasonal and have a wide range of job functions.

Safety Director Michael Francis said 200 supervisors have been trained to observe employees once a month and provide safety feedback. The observations are reported to the parks and recreation team, and employee feedback is sought.

“Those behaviors, whether they be positive or negative in aspect, we take them as a learning situation,” said Mary Ellen Donner, the city’s parks and recreation director.

A case study by DuPont showed the department’s workers comp claims decreased 25% in the program’s first year.

While experts said that behavioral safety efforts have been used by employers for at least two decades, today such programs use much different tactics.

Strategic Safety Associates’ Mr. Pater said behavioral safety programs sometimes get pushback from unions because they are viewed as blaming employee behavior for a company’s safety concerns.

“Everybody’s responsible,” Mr. Pater said. “It’s not just workers that are responsible for organizational safety.”

Tom Krause, a psychologist and independent consultant in Ojai, Calif., said there is a danger for firms to pinpoint employee behavior as a safety concern without providing proper equipment and safe facilities to protect workers.