

# Behavior change versus culture change: Divergent approaches to managing workplace safety<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts two prominent and seemingly antagonistic safety management rubrics: the behavior change and culture change approaches to safety. The two perspectives are analyzed in terms of their conceptual and theoretical foundations, defining characteristics, and apparent strengths and weaknesses. The level of empirical support for each approach is also assessed. The argument is advanced that the two approaches are essentially complementary and that their respective strengths can be merged into a more balanced and comprehensive approach for managing workplace safety. This integrated approach has two key features: (1) a data-based and participatory problem-solving process that emulates some of the inherent strengths of behavior change technology, and (2) a more explicit culture change process that can be systematically monitored and assessed.

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## **1. Introduction**

In the United States in particular, two fairly distinct approaches to managing workplace safety have competed for attention and have generated a considerable amount of debate and controversy during the past decade. The first of these approaches, behavior-based safety, focuses on the identification and modification of critical safety behaviors, and emphasizes how such behaviors are linked to workplace injuries and losses. The second approach, in contrast, emphasizes the fundamental importance of the organization's safety culture and how it shapes and influences safety behaviors and safety program effectiveness. Adding to this mix, each movement has recruited its own persuasive proponents and vocal detractors. On the surface at least, the two approaches appear to be in direct opposition to each other and represent two entirely different world views of injury causation and safety management.

With this as the starting point, the present paper had four purposes: (1) to compare and contrast the two approaches in terms of theoretical and conceptual background, defining characteristics, and strengths and weakness; (2) to summarize the nature and extent of empirical support for each approach; (3) to look for points of articulation or synergy between the two movements; and (4) to discuss future directions or strategies for improving the management of workplace safety. The final portion of this paper discusses how the best attributes of both approaches might be brought together and integrated into a workable new approach. The considerable rhetoric surrounding the two approaches would seem to indicate that they have little in common; however, we conclude that the two approaches share the same basic short- and long-term goals, and that their respective strengths and weakness are largely complementary.

## **2. Comparison of behavior change and culture change approaches**

The behavior change and culture change approaches to improving safety performance are quite different in terms of background, key aspects, and typical implementation strategies. They each possess different strengths and weaknesses, and, interestingly, the strengths of one approach tend to show up as weaknesses in the other.

### *2.1. Background and key aspects*

Behavior-based safety management is essentially an extension of applied behavior analysis or behavior modification. It makes use of well-established and powerful principles of operant conditioning and reinforcement theory. Although these principles were developed initially through laboratory experiments with animals, they have been shown to have wide applicability to behavior change efforts in a variety of clinical and applied contexts (Kazdin, 1973; Nemeroff and Karoly, 1991). Some experts draw a distinction between the terms behavior modification and applied behavior

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