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Behaviour-Based Safety: The Leadership Strategy India Needs to Prevent Industrial Accidents

AUTHOR Himanshu Nautiyal

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Introduction

In recent years, India has witnessed a disturbing rise in industrial accidents across sectors. Despite modern equipment and expanding compliance frameworks, preventable tragedies continue to occur with alarming regularity.

- In 2024 alone, over 400 workers lost their lives and more than 850 sustained serious injuries in workplace incidents across manufacturing, mining, and energy sectors.
- On average, three workers die every day in registered factories due to safety lapses, mostly among contract workers with limited training and oversight.
- Between 2018 and 2020, more than 3,300 factory deaths were officially recorded in India yet only 14 convictions were made under the Factories Act.

The new Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSH) Code, 2020, while progressive on paper, has in many cases diluted enforcement by relaxing inspection norms and encouraging self-certification. As a result, compliance often becomes an administrative exercise rather than a leadership priority.

Caselet: When Silence Spoke Louder Than Slides

A striking example reveals the difference between *compliance* and *culture.*
A local company, recently acquired by a global organisation known for its uncompromising safety standards, prepared an elaborate presentation for the incoming Head of Marketing of the parent company soon to take charge as CEO.

The local leadership team opened the meeting proudly with charts of accident-free days, awards, and safety metrics. The visiting executive listened politely, smiled, shook his head gently, and motioned with his hand to move on without saying a word. His silent gesture carried a message far deeper than any speech:
“Safety is not something you present, it’s something you live.”

That moment captured the essence of a mature safety culture one where safety is not a slide in a presentation, but a behaviour embedded in every decision, conversation, and action across the organisation.

From Compliance to Culture

This is where Behaviour-Based Safety (BBS) becomes critical. India no longer needs only more safety systems or audits; it needs leaders who model safety through their behaviour.
BBS bridges that gap moving from rules and checklists to habits and shared ownership. It is the cornerstone of transforming safety from a compliance metric to a core leadership value that sustains itself through culture.

And as history reminds us, when safety becomes part of leadership DNA **as exemplified by DuPont’s century-old journey** excellence follows naturally.

Background

When we speak of safety, the name of DuPont immediately comes to mind. DuPont, founded in 1802, prioritized safety from the start. Initially making gunpowder, the founder built his house in the blast zone to share risks with employees. By 1811 strict safety rules were in place, including bans on strangers, matches, alcohol, and sharp objects. Safety became critical by 1920s, reflected in low injury rates and initiatives like the “Safety First” program, establishing DuPont as a global safety leader. Using its expertise in attaining global standards in safety performance, coupled with significant demand for assistance from various organisations, DuPont developed the Behaviour-Based Safety (BBS) program in the 1960s to provide consultancy to organisations globally. I am fortunate to have been one of the first few individuals in India trained as BBS trainer by DuPont in 2003 while in Hindustan Lever Ltd., the pioneering Indian company known for its commitment to Safety and other sustainability aspects. I trained 380 officers with direct certification from DuPont, and successfully implemented BBS in the units I worked with. Furthermore, I provided support to other units in adopting BBS methodologies.

In occupational safety, the concept of Behaviour-Based Safety (BBS) has drawn both admiration and skepticism. Some see it as a serious approach to workplace safety, while others dismiss it as a passing fad. Its principles and implementation show BBS to

be a fundamental pillar for building a strong safety culture within an organisation.

Certain Questions that come in the way of BBS implementation:

Challenges Perceived by Leadership in Implementing BBS (Myths)	The Fact
We are not yet ready to build Safety Culture	Whether you like it or not, whether you know it or not, the good news is You have a culture already. The bad news is non-alignment and waste of internal energy in the absence of conscious efforts by the organisation in defining and shaping its culture.
Majority of incidents involve contract workmen who come from low-income backgrounds, unskilled, uneducated, engaged in non-routine/project work, have no accountability & Ownership for Safety besides having very little desire, aspiration & passion to change. Additionally, contractors experience a high attrition and churning rate of contract workmen.	Always remember your response and actions as if you are the Parent of a Toddler. It is the responsibility of the organisation to put relevant systems and processes to ensure proper contractor induction, training, and management to ensure no incident.
We have good infrastructure and engineering control in place.	Good infrastructure including equipment with safe design, layout, material handling, tools & tackles, lighting, Ventilation, etc. will certainly enhance safety performance. However, good infrastructure alone does not ensure good safety. A typical example is the aviation industry, despite the highest safety systems and processes witnessed 20 Air crashes in 2019 alone, though with only 289 deaths considered the safest in the aviation industry. Very recently on November 17, 2023, Two IndiGo planes narrowly avoided collision near Delhi airport after one veered off course, with swift evasive actions by one pilot, triggered by TCAS alarms.
Facilities and manufacturing shops may require a thorough review of worker behavior alongside proper design and engineering assessments before implementing Behaviour-Based Safety (BBS). Addressing any gaps in infrastructure and design is an urgent prerequisite to ensure effective BBS implementation	In fact, working on behaviour should be a must and urgent requirement if there are gaps in infrastructure and design. A structured BBS program will make employees aware of the gaps and how to address them while engineering and design solutions are identified and implemented.

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Model: From Behaviors to Human Factor

Reasons BBS implementation has failed:

Many progressive companies start implementing BBS with lots of energy without full understanding, only to feel disappointed and abort the efforts midway. Some of the key points are:

Reason for Failure	Appropriate actions for Successful BBS implementation
Gaps in leadership understanding and commitment	For BBS initiative to be successful Leadership should display visible commitment at times, this includes understanding, engagement, monitoring, review, appreciation, demonstration, and promotion of BBS at times.
Unrealistic Time Frames	Building culture is not a hundred-meter dash race but a marathon, that requires a long-term approach rather than putting all the efforts for a short duration. BBS is not a panacea but part of the entire safety echo system.
Scrapping all Existing Systems	Integrate BBS into existing Safety Management Systems is the right approach. Remember BBS is not a panacea but needs to part of the Safety Management system with strong leadership commitment and demonstration.

Resources and support needed to implement BBS	BBS implementation will need additional resources for training and monitoring besides leadership time commitment for demonstration, review.
Failure to measure and appreciate benefits of BBS implementation	A dashboard to measure current status and improvement targets with regular leadership demonstration and review is a must to keep the drive.
Unable to engage employees in the BBS process.	Employee engagement right from leadership, middle management to involving frontline is key to success.
Identifying root cause of unsafe behaviour	In the majority of times, the root cause behind what seems to be an unsafe behaviour could be inadequate system, infrastructure, or unawareness about the consequences, inadequate training, or leadership gaps. For example, if the valve of equipment is positioned at a Weight and there is no proper ladder or platform, the workman will probably use a drum as a makeshift platform every time he needs to adjust the valve, that too most probably without a helmet and safety use.

Typical time frame to implement BBS: While the actual time frame to implement BBS will depend upon the nature, strength, and the approach to implement. Typically, in a medium organisation benefit of BBS implementation in dashboard will start reflecting from 10 to 15 months.

BBS Benefits: Implementing BBS properly with appropriate leadership dashboards, gives both tangible and intangible benefits extending beyond safety and touching all aspects of the organisation. Tangible benefits of the efforts to build safety culture coupled with proper tools, engagement forums, monitoring mechanism, and reward and review mechanism, is seen in all aspects of Production, Quality, Delivery, Safety, Moral, Sustainability, and Innovation. In addition to many intangible benefits of building a vibrant culture coupled with a sense of pride and ownership, high employee involvement, teamwork, and morale, A pleasant workplace with clear signage, directions, and boards visitors delight, harmonious good industrial relations, and more collaboration between different units of the cluster, etc.

Conclusion: Building culture in a structured manner will pave the foundation to an organization like BHEL having aspirations of becoming a Global Engineering Enterprise. For this positive leadership mindset plays a very important role and along with BBS both one to one as well as team coaching will surely benefit. Using culture building and integrating with other key drivers like Innovation, Zero Defect, First Time Right will certainly make BHEL reach its global aspirations.

Leadership: The Invisible Shield of Safety

Every incident, whether large or small, carries a message that echoes beyond statistics and compliance it reminds us that *safety begins where leadership begins.* Machines, systems, and audits may define standards, but it is leadership behaviour that defines culture.

India's journey toward industrial excellence cannot be complete unless safety becomes a **leadership-led movement**. True transformation happens when leaders walk the shop floor with curiosity rather than authority, when they listen before they instruct, and when they demonstrate that *every life matters* more than every target.

A leader's visible commitment a pause to correct an unsafe act, a genuine appreciation of safe behaviour, or a coaching conversation that builds awareness becomes the most powerful message an organisation can send. Over time, these small visible actions become the invisible shield protecting people, assets, and reputation.

Behaviour-Based Safety is a leadership mindset rather than a program. It reminds us that behaviour follows belief and belief is shaped by what leaders do, not what they say.

In the end, **the best safety policy is not written on paper but lived in practice.** When safety becomes synonymous with leadership itself, organisations don't just prevent accidents they build cultures that inspire excellence, trust, and pride.

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