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Strike the safety balance: Modern psychology vs behavioural adherence

Effective safety measures require a combination of behavioural-based safety (BBS) programs, and modern psychology techniques, leading safety specialists have said.

Employers that rely solely on BBS are likely to find that the effectiveness of their safety strategy will plateau, according to DuPont Sustainable Solutions principal psychologist Dr Rod Gutierrez.

Gutierrez said that the premise of BBS programs is that individuals are motivated to act safely through fear of repercussion rather than a true internal commitment to safety.

However, he added that BBS programs are destined for limited effectiveness, because people become used to the reward or punishment resulting in a decrease in safe behaviours due to repetitive exposure.

DuPont's business director, Fiona Murfitt, added that BBS programs don't take into account psychological elements such as what employees think and feel.

Murfitt gave the example that employers who target both behavioural and psychological elements are more likely to create a culture where employees choose to be safe, rather than following the rules just because they have to.

Additionally, Murfitt emphasised the need for a safety culture to be driven from the top down - if you've got leadership commitment, even the most seemingly resistant employees can be influenced to internalise safety.

Veolia Environmental Services is one company that has taken a behavioural approach to safety training, and has enlisted the assistance of training and coaching organisation People & Quality Solutions (PaQS), to assist with the rollout of the new approach.

According to Veolia's WA Training & Development Manager, Nathan Simms, the company focuses on each individual staff member being responsible for safety.

"Our company focuses heavily on safety and we have the correct systems in place, but we also want to build safety awareness from the top down and the bottom up. Participants play an active role and see how they contribute to the bigger picture. It shows them that everyone is responsible for safety," Simms said.

Veolia employs 450 people in WA and during its training sessions, PaQS' safety psychologists train company representatives as safety coaches, who then return to their organisation to implement specialised safety training.

Simms said that after analysing their incident rates, there was evidence to suggest their new practices led to a decrease in incidents.

"We've also seen a much higher awareness of safety," he added.

As a result of its success in Western Australia, other states will now engage in the program, Simms said.

According to PaQS managing director, Carl Reams, attitudes can change over time and that's exactly what drives the programs.

"People will willingly adopt new information, beliefs and attitudes very quickly when it's presented in the right way for the right reason. If they can see how it will benefit them individually, they're far more likely to cooperate," Reams said.