
Beyond Supercharging: How Do You Actually Upgrade Safety Actions?

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By [Robert Pater](#) | Feb 01, 2017

How many times have you heard (or even said) this common complaint, "What's the matter with people? Why won't they do what's good for them?" Or one of its variations of "Why don't workers embrace and practice what we experts say they should?"

Some say the answer *should* be easy: Watch what people do, let them know how well they adhere to best practices, and then re-monitor them for expected improvements. The only problem is that it's rare for people to fully do what others tell them to. Oh, they may comply when they know they're being watched, at least superficially enough to cover themselves from getting in hot water or embarrassed. But remove the perceived outside pressure and they'll typically revert to their old ways. This isn't just selective perception or my opinion. In fact, this "Supercharger" effect has been studied by renowned Changemaster Kurt Lewin. His research revealed that when workers see direct outside pressures as sufficiently strong and coercive (exerted by a supervisor, staff professional, or anyone with power), most will indeed comply *but just long enough* to deflect the heat off themselves.

At best, Supercharging only creates minimal compliance. Or as Andrew Grove expounded in his excellent "High Output Management," "Fear never creates peak performance, only minimal performance." Because Superchargers can only effectively be in and therefore see one place at a time, their attention has to shift around (like the piercing Eye of Sauron in "Lord of the Rings.") And when the watching Supercharger focuses elsewhere, employees sense the absence of this threat, breathe a sigh of relief, and revert to their ingrained methods. So their

"compliance" tends to be momentarily "on." This force-them-to-comply strategy is especially limited with a dispersed/autonomous workforce or even with plant-based workers whose supervisors have a large number of direct reports.

Not to mention that some workforces—especially long-term and younger workers—resent being pressed and or distrusted to work safely and efficiently; we've seen such reactions rebounding into resistance, *actually increased* "I'll-show-them" risk-taking and other activities that Superchargers definitely don't want.

These principles directly apply to other measures of Safety performance. Command-and-control approaches to Safety leadership seem to periodically rear their inefficient heads. It's as if when leaders harden up and become more commanding, "tougher," when they become frustrated with not being able to drive toward the next level of Safety performance, or see slippage in just-ok Safety actions and results. For reasons described above, this frequently backfires—but at least these leaders feel as if they're doing *something*. Conversely, when better leaders feel vexed, they don't allow exasperation to drive their decisions and actions. Their default principle? If this approach isn't working, try something different, rather than doubling down with more of the same. They might watch and listen more, instead of lashing out in frustration; investigate rather than attempting to blindly overpower underlying contributors to unsafe actions; and elicit worker and supervisor involvement in piloting different approaches that might better address current stuck problems, not forcing pre-determined (and often inapplicable) "solutions" onto those actually doing the tasks.

When it comes to Safety leadership, *how* you do something is often more important than *what* you do. That is, two methods for change may appear to have comparable components, even be called by similar terms, but may actually be done very differently. And everyone knows the difference.

For example, a common approach to changing Safety actions is through checklist monitoring systems, typically labeled "Behavior Based Safety." Kyle O'Dell, RBU Upper Rockies HSE Supervisor at ConocoPhillips, wrote a thoughtful LinkedIn post about BBS that started: "If you want to start an argument in the safety community, just bring up your stance on behavior based safety (BBS) and watch the sparks fly!.... BBS is viewed as an untouchable holy land in some organizations, while other organizations implemented the process and had poor results."

We've worked with many companies that already had in place BBS processes and have found the most successful ones avoid a Supercharger approach to monitoring. They instead focus on engagement, attention, and reinforcement, assisting rather than berating workers toward greater Safety mindfulness, decision-

making, and actions. And knowing that there's no one cure-all for complex Safety problems, companies with the best BBS methods tend to be highly receptive to ways of augmenting and improving their BBS processes and results.

If you have a BBS process and find it's no longer fully hitting the mark, there are always opportunities to improve results, inject booster shots of energy and attention, and incorporate new actions into already existing methods. Note that mental associations/perceptions can work for or against you. Kyle further pointed out that many bargaining units have rejected BBS charting systems because they view this approach as blaming the worker without the company taking its share of responsibility for Safety. This is a clear signal that workers saw the BBS process as attempts at Supercharging—and reacted negatively. Some even wound up reacting adversely to merely the word "behavior."

Superchargers tend to bully and blame. In contrast, stronger leaders listen, teach, and learn (of course, they also discipline in clear-cut cases). Better to associate BBS and all Safety processes as concerned about and supportive of workers, rather than implying in any way, "You're totally at fault for any incident." Be wary of resorting to coercive leadership, especially during times of frustration. Pushing a group to perform is an overwhelming task. Better to determine and implement ways to magnetize/attract and draw people toward Safer sensing, making better decisions, and taking Safety actions. We have a long-term raft of statistics that corroborate this is the most effective and efficient way that companies can make significant strides in Safety communications, actions, leadership, culture, and performance.

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