



WHITE PAPER NO. 1

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Overcoming The Five Behavioural Traps

The Ultimate Solution for Safety Performance

1.0 The Challenge

Our biggest challenges in helping people to work more safely is to get them to wear the correct PPE every time, to follow the procedures every time, to use their training and common sense, to risk assess thoroughly, not to take short cuts, and to stop any task that seems unsafe.

Most organisations have in place all the systematic and technical/engineering solutions to protect their people from harm. These systems and tools should be easy to use and monitored to ensure they are being used properly. Once you have all the systems and tools in place and they are working well, what more can we do to help people avoid accidents? Accidents still happen *even though* these systems are in place, and that is the challenge.

This challenge can be expressed in another way. Why do intelligent, competent, experienced, well-meaning people do the wrong thing for safety, *even when they know what the right thing is*? This is a fundamental question: Why do people do things they know they shouldn't?

In this White Paper, I'll share the answer to that question. I have tested this answer on hundreds of incidents, over twenty-three years, and in a variety of industries in thirteen countries.

The reason why good people do the wrong thing even when they know the right thing, boils down to just *five* behavioural traps.

Before going into detail on these five behavioural traps, let me explain how I discovered them.

2.0 The Beginnings – Recognising the Five Behavioural Traps

In 1995, a client – a drilling company in the oil and gas industry – was having high potential incidents. The company had all the safety systems in place, and the people were well-trained and competent. The HSE and Operations Manager were at a loss about what more they could do. In one incident a person severed the tendons in his middle finger on his right hand. The person was unloading sheets of metal from a truck, a task that was done every Monday morning, and required the use of Kevlar gloves. However, the injured person was wearing ordinary work gloves.

The recommendations in the incident report read:

- "1. Remind everyone to use the right PPE for the job.*
- 2. Discipline the person for not following procedures."*

In my naivety I asked, *"But why did the person do this ... why did he not wear the Kevlar gloves as required?"*

The response was something like: *"Who knows, we provide the PPE, we tell people constantly to wear it and be careful – just someone being stupid and violating his procedure."*

So I asked the injured person: "Did you know you had to wear Kevlar gloves?"

Response: "Yes"

Me: "How do you know you have to wear Kevlar gloves?"

Response: "It's in the procedure and we do this every Monday."

Me: "So why did you not wear them?"

Response: "Because there was none in the store room!"

After confirming with the storeman that there were no Kevlar gloves available on that day ("... the ordering system was screwed up ..."), I returned to the injured person and said he was correct – there were no Kevlar gloves in the store on that date. But then I asked the crunch question:

"Why did you not stop the job then?"

Response: "I couldn't"

Me: "Why not?"

Response: "Because the fabrication team needed the metal to get on with their job."

Me: "Why did you not tell them that you didn't have the correct PPE and they would have to wait?"

Response, with shock and horror: "I couldn't do that!"

Me: "Why not?"

Response: "Because I'd get my arse kicked!"

This was the light bulb moment.

Here was an experienced person who knew the procedure, knew what he should do, but did not do it because *he was afraid*.

So, the **fear factor** was the first behavioural trap I identified. No matter how brilliant the safety systems and tools, no matter how many times you tell people they have the right and obligation to stop any unsafe task, they will not follow procedure and will not stop jobs if they are afraid of something.

From that moment on, when faced with an incident, I kept asking, *Why?* Why do competent, experienced people do the wrong things for safety even when they know it's wrong?

The result of asking that question resulted in a very surprising finding. In every incident there are one or more of just *five* traps in our human nature that lead people astray.

So, what are these five behavioural traps that make people do the wrong thing for safety?

3.0 The Five Behavioural Traps

3.1 Lack of Awareness

People often get hurt because they do not recognise the hazard. We are aware first through our senses of sight, touch, hearing and smell. But awareness is not just seeing, touching, or hearing or smelling. It is also a micro-second mental assessment of what the signal means and if it is a threat.

3.2 Unreasonable and Unintentional Pressure from Supervisors or Workmates

In the "olden days" there was lots of intentional pressure in the workplace. Managers and supervisors used to shout and mock employees and threaten their jobs: "Do it or go!" "There is no barbed wire on the factory gate!" "If you don't want to do it we'll get someone else!" Perhaps there is still some of this going on, but most pressure today is unintentional. For example, a manager stressing that they need help or contacting people three times to see how they are getting on, could also be counted as pressure. The way a supervisor talks to people or a seemingly unapproachable manager could also create pressure for some employees.

People who have been involved in incidents often claim they were put under pressure. When asked what they mean by pressure here are some of the answers:

- Not being given enough or clear instructions
- Shouting, swearing
- Body language indicating disapproval
- Not being given enough time to complete the job
- Being asked twice (or more times) how long they'll be on a job
- Mocking, belittling, insulting, accusing, comparing
- Being told that the other crew managed to do it
- Being told that the client will be unhappy and we may lose the contract.

There are two points to remember about pressure. First, pressure can come from workmates as well as from managers and supervisors. Secondly, most people are under pressure most of the time, and in some ways that is good. We need some pressure to motivate us. The problem arises when the pressure is *unreasonable*. This means that everyone has to be more aware so that they do not create unreasonable or *unintentional* pressure, and people doing jobs must recognise and resist the unreasonable pressure.

3.3 The Fear Factor

It is necessary to distinguish between positive fear and negative fear. Positive fear motivates us to do the right things – to do a good job, to treat people with respect, to turn up on time. Negative fear prevent us from doing the right thing. When good people were asked why they went ahead when they knew they should not, here are some of the negative fears they said influenced them:

- Afraid to be seen as lazy
- Afraid to be seen as a trouble maker
- Afraid of looking stupid
- Afraid to be seen as a bad person, a disloyal or unhelpful workmate
- Afraid to admit that they don't understand or don't know something
- Afraid to be seen as incompetent
- Afraid to be seen as weak or not being the "hero"

- Afraid of upsetting work mates
- Afraid of losing their jobs

3.4 Loss of Concentration

For many decades it was well-known that fatigue is often a cause of accidents. What was not made clear enough is that in addition to physical fatigue and sleepiness adversely affecting people's functioning, it was the lack of concentration that contributed to mistakes and accidents. In addition to fatigue there are other circumstances that can lead to loss of concentration, such as:

- Distractions at the worksite (confused instruction, people shouting or loud noises, being too hot or cold, and even bad smells)
- Routine, repetitive and boring jobs
- Being worried about not being able to do the job at hand
- Serious relationship problems at home
- Illness of oneself or a family member
- Children in trouble
- Financial problems

There are two main things to consider when thinking about loss of concentration. First, most people are worried about something most of the time, and many people are tired. The problem arises when the worry and tiredness reach a level where a person's ability to function safely is affected. Secondly, the recent concern about mental health is a realisation that modern-day life is creating stressors that make people worry, and that this worry could affect their work, including their own and others' safety.

Consequently, while managers must strive to reduce too much stress in the workplace and be compassionate when employees have domestic worries, employees themselves must recognise when they are not fit to continue a task given to them.

3.5 Wrongly Diminishing the Risk

This is the behavioural trap that took a few years to identify, and which is so self-evident once we are told about it. Because of the fear factor most people want to go ahead with a job that may not be as safe as it could be. In order to justify our wrong decisions, we make mental excuses to give us "permission" to go ahead. In other words, we recognise the hazard but we *wrongly* diminish the risk. Some of the mental excuses include:

- *"It's only a small one"*
- *"I'm just going to..."*
- *"It will only take five minutes"*
- *"It's only two miles"*
- *"We've done it fifty times before"*
- *"I'll be extra/very careful"*

- *"The other team did it okay"*

Most safety professionals will recognise why in every case the logic is flawed in these mental excuses; for example, we know that time and distance are irrelevant, and that repeating an unsafe does not make it safe.

4.0 The Ultimate Solution

It is well-accepted today that the errors by frontline operators are the culmination of a bunch of errors made by others, weeks or even months before. These errors distant in time and place to the worksite create the conditions that lead people into temptation to do the wrong thing. It is right that all causes of an accident should be identified, and steps taken to correct the conditions and thereby reduce the chance of errors.

However, despite all our effort, we will not erase every error caused by others. This means that now and again frontline operators will be faced with unsatisfactory or unsafe conditions. At this point we hope that operators are aware enough to spot the hazard, do not wrongly diminish the risk, and have the courage to stop the job. In other words, it is the operator's ability to overcome the five behavioural traps that will save them. In this sense, the five behavioural traps are the ultimate piece of the jigsaw – the ultimate root cause of safety performance.

Consequently, no matter how brilliant the many safety systems and tools, unless we teach people how to overcome the five behavioural traps, the safety performance will not be as good as it could be.

5.0 The Way Forward

There is always a gap between knowing and doing. So, now we *know* what these five behavioural traps are, how do we teach people to overcome them? In the next white paper I will share with you:

- The workshop formats I use to show people how the five behavioural traps influence their decisions, which in turn result in behaviours that could hurt them and others.
- How to integrate the five behavioural traps into inductions and safety meetings.
- How to go beyond the technical causes in accident investigation and to identify the underlying behavioural traps.
- How to use past incident case studies to show the behavioural traps at work as causes of accidents.
- How to weave the five behavioural traps into your literature of all kinds – for example, procedures, risk assessments and posters.

For more information, have a look at the contents of the e-manual: *What Is Behavioural Safety? How to apply it for Maximum Benefit*, available online at <http://www.safetyimprovers.com/e-manuals/behavioural-safety/>. Your comments on this white paper are welcomed – please email me at bill.robbs@safetyimprovers.com.