Mitigating the adverse impact of some workplace stressors with Behavioural Safety.

Dr Dominic Cooper C.Psychol AFBPsS CFIOSH

B-Safe Management Solutions Inc, 6648 East State Road 44, Franklin, IN 46131, USA.

The concept of stress

The concept of stress has become a hot topic for the safety profession in recent years. In part this is [1] due to the recent award of stress claims in the courts, [2] the flurry of stress surveys carried out by different employers organisations showing that stress is thought to be on the increase[1], and [3] the annual £32 billion costs of mental health problems to British industry caused by absenteeism and lost production[2]. The relationship between absenteeism and accidents is well documented and is thought to emanate from the increased activity rate of those remaining at work[3,4]. The HSC's consultative document on workplace stress has also firmly placed the issue on the Health & Safety agenda[1].

When we ask what stress is, it becomes apparent that there is no universally accepted definition. The HSC, based on much psychological research, have defined it as follows: '*Stress is the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demands placed on them*'. The excessive pressures or demands that they are thinking of include: [1] excessive heat, noise and lighting, poor housekeeping and other aspects of the working environment; [2] Working conditions such as shift-work, unsociable hours, pay and benefits; [3] continual changes (e.g. restructuring, adapting to new technology); [4] The amount of work (too much or too little) [5] The lack of control or autonomy over one's job; [6] Machine paced work (excessive speed required); [7] Relationships with others (a lack of managerial support or bullying and harassment); [8] poor communications (i.e. no regular feedback about performance); [9] Too much or too little involvement in the decision-making process; [10] lack of job security; and [11] the type of organisation (e.g. authoritarian or participative). This wide range of factors illustrates that almost anything in the world of work that has an adverse effect on people can be viewed as a stressor. In many ways, whether or not any of these are seen as a stressor, will depend upon the person's experience and confidence in their coping skills[5]. What one person might see as a stressor, another may see as a challenge, and *vice versa*. Discounting post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) caused by exposure to a single terrible event, if a person does not feel able to cope with the demands their job makes on them, *and* they experience severe anxiety or concern about it, *and* these two factors continually adversely influence their job performance over an extended period of time, *and* they have not experienced any adverse events outside of work during this time, then they *might* indeed be psychologically 'distressed' by such workplace 'stressors'.

However, there is not one stress management panacea that can put 'everything to rights'. Stress management can be classified in terms of its objectives, its focus, and the type of intervention required to carry it out[6]. In principle, three types of stress management strategies exist: Prevention; Timely Reactions, and Rehabilitation. Prevention often refers to the control of workplace factors and hazards faced by employees, and the provision of the appropriate job-related training to minimise the possibility of people experiencing stress. Timely reactions, refers to improving people's (usually managers') ability to recognise and deal with stressors as they are identified. Rehabilitation involves the provision of supportive mechanisms to help people cope with and recover from the problems that exist.

Many stress management initiatives tend to focus on rehabilitation using a variety of relaxation techniques such as lunchtime reading schemes, in-house poetry readings, yoga classes, massages, counselling, Chi-Kung and Feng Shui. Given that 'prevention is better than cure', it seems far more sensible to identify potential workplace

stressors and put risk control measures in place, rather than spending a lot of time, money and effort trying to pick up the pieces via rehabilitation schemes.

Behavioural Safety
After 10 years research and practice, Behavioural Safety is now becoming an established part of the UK safety professions 'armoury' to reduce accidents and improve safety behaviour. ICI, McVities, Novartis, Birds Eye, Mobil, Shotton Paper and Millenium Inorganic Chemicals are just some of the companies that have experienced (and still are) improved safety performance and reduced accident rates when Behavioural Safety was introduced. However, it is important to recognise that like most improvement initiatives, Behavioural Safety takes time and commitment from both management and employees at all levels for it to exert a positive impact.

Based on the principle that 95% of all accidents are triggered by unsafe behaviour, Behavioural Safety interventions focus on that small proportion of specific behaviours that have traditionally been implicated in the lion's share of the company's accidents. Identifying these is achieved by conducting Applied Behavioural Analyses on the company's historical accident database to discover the triggers that led someone to behave unsafely, and the consequences (i.e. rewards) to the person for engaging in that unsafe behaviour. Very often it is found that people gain positive rewards for working unsafely (e.g. saving time). Conversely, those who work safely tend to be penalised in some way (e.g. it takes longer to complete a job). Thus, the rewards for behaving unsafely tend to outweigh those for working safely.

Perusals of the triggers for behaving unsafely also reveal the wide range of management system faults that are associated with each incident. Common triggers include 'getting the job done', 'meeting excessive production targets', 'competing priorities', 'tight delivery schedules', 'lack of training', 'lack of availability of equipment and/ or materials' all of which have been viewed as stressors by the HSC[1] or the courts[7]. Other factors thought to be workplace stressors are often in the direct control of front line-management and/or employees: e.g. poor housekeeping and the wearing of hearing protection to mitigate the effects of noise. Thus the first steps of a Behavioural Safety initiative often identify those organisational and individual factors related to both accidents and workplace stressors.

The next step is to present the findings of the Applied Behavioural Analysis to all concerned. The senior management team is informed of the systems faults that were identified so that they can be dealt with at an organisational level. The specific unsafe behaviours (e.g. not wearing hearing protection) are presented to the workgroups or departments where the accidents occurred, with a view to establishing that the identified behaviours still occur. These and other behaviours suggested and agreed by the workgroup are developed into checklists so that focused 'peer-to-peer' monitoring can take place. Such consensus also builds in ownership of the checklists. It must be emphasised that nobody must be personally identified from this monitoring process, else people will withdraw as they will not believe it is 'psychologically safe' for them to become involved.

When agreement has been reached, people (usually volunteers) from each workgroup are trained as behavioural observers so that there is a consistency of interpretation between the observers across different shifts. Once trained the observers spend about four weeks conducting observations, but without giving feedback to their peers so as to establish a baseline of current safety performance. In other words in the same way as production data informs management as to what productivity improvement targets should be set, the workgroups need to know what their current levels of performance are so that they can set their own safety improvement targets. As well as inducing commitment and ownership to the overall process, participating in the setting of targets also allows the workgroup some degree of control and autonomy over their own performance thus mitigating some of the effects of this stressor[1].

Management / supervisory styles are also known to exert substantial influences on employees emotional well-being (i.e. stress), Authoritarian styles tend to induce distress in employees, whereas participative styles tend to diminish it. Behavioural Safety is largely based on a participative management style, with the focus firmly placed on the encouragement of safe behaviour, rather than punishing unsafe behaviours. This is because

research has shown that discipline has to occur immediately and every single time, for it to be effective. This tends to be impracticable in most types of organisation, as line-management is not always going to see somebody every single time they behaving unsafely. On the other hand, encouragement (e.g. praise) for engaging in safe behaviour does not need to be given immediately and every single time, once the behaviour starts to become an established part of the person's behavioural patterns. As such, focusing on the positive aspects of safety performance by giving praise and encouragement highlights the link between the desired safe behaviours and the rewards received. In addition, encouragement helps to establish ownership of, and commitment to, the processes involved. Importantly, encouragement also reduces the potential for stress induced by an inappropriate management style

Research has also identified the lack of performance feedback as a workplace stressor. However, a key feature of any Behavioural Safety initiative is the provision of regular weekly feedback to each workgroup about their safety performance. Unsafe behaviours that have been observed during the week are explored with the workgroups at 30-minute meetings to try and identify what the associated problems are so that the appropriate remedial actions can take place. In principle, those actions that are within the workgroups control, are dealt with by themselves, whereas remedial actions not in the workgroups control are fed through the organisations other systems.

Conclusion
The idea that Behavioural Safety initiatives can usefully address the presence of workplace stressors is somewhat novel. Nonetheless, an examination of the stress research literature reveals that Behavioural Safety is already addressing many facets of workplace stress, by:

[1] Identifying and dealing with potential workplace stressors;

[2] Allowing employees some degree of autonomy and control over targets and remedial actions;

[3] Facilitating the use of a participative management style;

[4] Providing regular performance feedback;

[5] Improving communications between management and employees.

Although these features are normal facets of Behavioural Safety, the cost-benefit ratio is considerably improved as it also reduces the potential for stress claims, as well as improving safety performance and reducing accidents.

References

1] HSC (1999) *Managing Stress At Work* (Discussion Document). HSE Books.

2] Anon (1998) The cost of mental health problems in business. *Occupational Safety & Health*, 28(1) pp11.

3] Smith *et al*. (1978) Characteristics of successful safety programmes. *Journal of Safety Research,* 10, 87-88.

4] Cooper *et al* (1994) Reducing accidents using goal setting and feedback: A field study. *Journal of Occupational and Organisational Psychology,* **67**, 219-240.

5] Lazarus, R.S. & Folkman, S. (1984) *Stress, Appraisal and Coping.*Springer Publications, New York.

6] Newman, J. E., and Beehr, T. A. (1979) Personal and organizational strategies for handling job stress: a review of research and opinion. *Personnel Psychology*, **32**, 1-43.

7] Anon (1999) £67,000 damages for stress. *Safety & Health Practitioner*, **17 (8),** pp5.