

Safety Seminar

Dysfunctional Practices that Kill Your Safety Culture - Dr. Tim Ludwig

Our tendency is to blame workers for safety errors and label their personal failings as the cause of the error. We look at the behavior associated with incidents and blame the person as the cause. We label the person "stupid" and feel we have solved the problem. We haven't. Instead, a dysfunctional practice creeps into our safety management system, blinding us from finding the true root causes of at-risk behavior.

Labeling does not solve problems that cause error. Research shows that it may be an illusion of human perception leading us to false conclusions.

Our human tendencies result in interactions that hurt the safety of our workers and the effectiveness of the systems we put in place to protect them. These tendencies build dysfunctional management practices that create fear associated with your safety programs.

Behavioral science (Psychology) teaches us that labeling, such as calling someone stupid, is a short-cut wired in our brains ("Fast-Brain"). However, we can blind ourselves from reflective analyses ("Slow-Brain") required to understand the true causes of human performance when our intuition takes us down an illusory path quite different from reality.

Labeling creates a workplace-wide culture of fear. A worker's response to derogatory labeling is automatic. The body physically responds to negative labeling and threats of discipline with a visceral alarm that creates an anxiety response that workers avoid. This avoidance response is paired with your safety programs. Our goal is to create a safety culture where workers are engaged with situational awareness, peer coaching, and reporting, but our labeling will create avoidance of the very engagement we desperately need from our workers.

In this presentation Dr. Ludwig teaches a better way to analyze the behaviors of employees by determining the systems that put them in the position to take the risk in the first place. By analyzing the context of behaviour, we discover ways to change systems to optimize safe behavior and reduce injury. We will build alternatives to labeling with dispassionate and actionable analyses to help build systems that help workers discriminate the best behaviors for the situation.

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Dr. Ludwig discusses the following steps from Behavior Science:

1. Label Behavior. We define behavior as a dynamic variable, reacting every moment along predictable paths in the context of environmental events.
2. Identify the Variants. We then identify behavioral variants of safe behavior; those alternative competing behaviors that put workers at-risk.
3. Discriminate the Context. We analyze the work context of safe and at-risk behaviors to understand why the worker was put in position to take the risk and/or avoid the safe behavior.
4. Find the Solution. We analyze behaviors to determine systems that encourage risk and make adaptations to influence safe decisions.

About the Speaker:

Timothy Ludwig earned his Ph.D. in Behavioral Psychology at Virginia Tech researching the benefits of employee-driven behavioral safety programs under E. Scott Geller continuing his post-doctoral work in industrial engineering studying applications of W. Edwards Deming to quality and safety improvement.

Dr. Ludwig was cited in Industrial Safety and Hygiene News (ISHN) "50 Leaders for Today and Tomorrow". He serves on the Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies' (CCBS; behavior.org) Behavioral Safety Accreditation Commission that reviews best-in-industry safety practices and offers objective feedback on safety programs.

Dr. Ludwig is a Distinguished Graduate Professor at Appalachian State University where he teaches in the nationally recognized Industrial/Organizational Psychology graduate program. He served as editor of the Journal of Organizational Behavior Management and is the past President of the Organizational Behavior Management Network.

Dr. Ludwig's vita cites over 100 scholarly articles and presentations that empirically document the efficacy of behavioral science in providing solutions to improve safety and quality in industry. His books include *Intervening to Improve the Safety of Occupational Driving* (2001), *Behavioral Systems: Understanding Complexity in Organizations* (2012), *Sources of Behavioral Variance in Process Safety: Analysis and Intervention* (2018), *Dysfunctional Practices that Kill your Safety Culture* (2018) and *Kidz on Rebar: Reinforcing Safe Behavior* (in preparation).