



By James E. Leemann, Ph.D.

If someone wants to “beat your system” ...

Undercover bosses and safety ombudsmen are two strategies

Beating the system conjures up vivid images when it comes to safety. Every company has their “system beater,” some have more than one. Almost everyone knows who he or she is, but rarely does anyone intervene when these individuals are in the throes of beating the system. More often than not, system beaters beat the system when no one is watching.



So why do system beaters believe they need to beat the system?

Reasons range from a euphoric passion to beat the “Man” (or “Woman”) all the way to believing the only way to be recognized and rewarded is to rely on beating the system (i.e., taking safety shortcuts) to get the job done.

Oftentimes, system beaters want to beat the system because the rules are too rigid, and those who make the rules expect strict adherence to the rules all the time. Sometimes rules are based on the belief that those tasked with implementing the rules are not intelligent enough to know what to do or when an exception is in order.

I have found over the years that those who are expected to *implement* the rules know their jobs better than those who *create* the rules in the first place. In fact, they know their jobs so well they become extraordinarily innovative in crafting ways to beat the rules.

There is no debate that organizations need safety rules to guide employees in their daily work activities and ensure safety; however, to assume strict adher-

ence by everyone all the time is wishful thinking. Demanding strict adherence to all the rules all the time leads employees to disrespect all the rules when no exceptions are tolerated.

Rule-makers also assume that rule-implementers will not make any mistakes, in other words – Zero Injuries and

Incidents. When a mistake occurs, a need arises to beat the system particularly when the rule, strictly applied, results in a mistake. This is especially true when the rule-makers refuse to admit or listen to the rule-implementers’ suggestions for changing or improving the rules.

Minimizing the need to beat the system

According to Russell Ackoff and Sheldon Rovin, “...a system’s *flexibility* – its readiness, willingness, and ability to change or bend the rules when necessary – is the essence of avoiding the need to beat the system.”¹ Drawing upon Ackoff and Rovin’s suggestions to minimize the need to beat the system and applying them to a safety system, you might consider one or more of the following approaches:

- **For every safety rule there should be a safety professional authorized to override the safety rule when a situation warrants.** Obviously, deliberate thought and planning needs to be applied when such an override is requested and applied. It is also important that the authorizing safety professional be in close proximity to those requesting the override in order to fully

understand the circumstances.

- **Complaints about implementing safety rules are often made to individuals who can absolve themselves of responsibility by stating, “It’s not my job” or “I’m not responsible for that situation.”** Inevitably, these positions lead system beaters to beat the system. **Institute a system where whomever receives a safety complaint, regardless of level in the organization, is duty bound to either address the complaint or seek out help to handle the complaint appropriately.**

- **Effectively minimize the need to beat the safety system’s rules is to clearly explain, in detail, why the safety rule is in place.** In other words, the *reason* for the safety rule.

- **Handle complaints and reduce the need to beat the system by establishing a *safety ombudsman*, or rule-implementer *advocate*, to whom complaints are lodged.** The ombudsman or advocate has the authority to investigate the complaint and correct the safety rule if he or she deems it is justified. Rule-implementers should be aware of this avenue for filing complaints and the process should be as easy as possible.

- **Appoint a rule-implementer to be a member of the board of the organization to reduce complaints and the need to beat the system.** As a member of the board, the rule-implementer can point out the impact of safety rules and how modifications to the rules could improve productivity and safety.

- **Executives and managers should periodically become the *Undercover Boss* and work in operating**

units where safety rule complaints frequently surface. This presents the executive or manager with the opportunity to see, firsthand, what all the complaining is about.

■ **Look for opportunities to compliment individuals** who have raised an issue regarding a safety rule and feature the steps taken to address the issue.

Who's next?

As an EHS manager in DuPont, I recall one of our directors of operations instituting a safety practice whenever he first visited one of our manufacturing plants. Normally, the plant manager would convene a meeting of his staff first thing in the morning. The plant manager would introduce the director and everyone would "settle in" for another management meeting from Wilmington.

The director, being a great student of human behavior, would begin by asking the group, "Who do you all think will be the next person to get hurt on your site?"

After what seemed like an eternity and quite a few "deer-in-the-headlights" stares, someone would inevitably speak up and name someone. More often than not, everyone in the group would agree. At this point, the director would excuse himself,

turn to the plant manager and ask him or her to introduce him to the named person. After being introduced, the director would ask questions about the person's family and then discuss his concern for the person's safety. To say the impression the director left on the person was profound would be an understatement. This director's expression of concern for an individual's safety left a lasting impression on everyone on the plant.

Designing safety systems that don't need to be beaten

One of the most effective ways to avoid systems beating is to allow the systems beaters and rule-implementers to have an opportunity to design the system that will serve them. Now, for some safety pros, this might sound antithetical. The process involves the *Idealized Design* step in Ackoff's systems thinking methodology called *Interactive Planning*.

The systems beaters and rule-implementers begin with the assumption that the safety system to be redesigned no longer exists; so they are starting from scratch. Safety pros can be involved, but only as advisors, not participants or decision makers.

The *Idealized Design* process offers the group the unique opportunity to design a safety system they would have if they could design any safety system they wanted right now, not some time in the future. By allowing the systems beaters and the rule-implementers to design the new safety system, the level of ownership and personal commitment typically soars and the likelihood of adherence to the new safety system will be enhanced. In fact, I have witnessed past systems beaters become the individuals who intervene when one of their co-workers decides to try to beat the system.

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Reference

1. Ackoff, R.L. and S. Rovin. 2005. *Beating the System – Using Creativity to Outsmart Bureaucracies*. Berret-Koehler Publishers, Inc. San Francisco, CA.