



# Seven on Seven Behavior Modification

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*“Employees could see and hear lockout in their dreams!”*

Change does not happen overnight. Several years ago, I conducted a series of annual lockout/tagout training classes for a previous employer. We reviewed our requirements in detail and the expectations to follow our lockout procedures were clear. One week after the training concluded, an employee that attended one of the classes injured himself because he bypassed our procedures! He reached behind a fixed guard to access a chain drive while it was energized. You can imagine what happened in this “man vs. machine” scenario. The employee suffered a severe laceration when he lodged his finger between the sprocket and the chain. The employee experienced

pain and suffering, and I experienced the frustration most safety professionals can relate to in these situations. I asked myself, “What else can I do to prevent similar incidents? How can I influence behavior?”

The incident prompted me to ask difficult questions. Is it enough just to tell people what you expect? How does a management team motivate safe behavior? Is safe behavior a function of good training? How much communication is enough? How do you hold people accountable? The bottom line was that I had to find a way to make sure people made the right decisions. I had to create safe habits.

I decided to piece together two ideas. I have heard that it takes 21 days to break a habit,

and I have also heard that you have to hear things seven times before you remember it. I’m not sure if these ideas have a scientific basis, but they make sense. The concepts reinforce the idea that consistent repetition influences the way we make decisions – it has the potential to create safe habits. If you merge the two ideas together, you have a creative formula to influence actions. I decided to use the behavior modification concept with our lockout procedures.

I broke the modification process into three seven-day phases (seven on seven) that took a total of 21 consecutive workdays:

1. Phase 1 – Train & Communicate
2. Phase 2 – Monitor & Coach
3. Phase 3 – Instill Accountability

### Phase 1 – Train & Communicate

The phase one goal was to flood our workforce with a repetitive lockout message. Employees needed to see and hear our requirements from every direction. I wanted people to know the details of our procedures and understand the purpose for the rules. We took seven steps to accomplish our goal.

1. We had a team evaluate our procedures to insure they were adequate.
2. We posted equipment-specific procedures in visible areas so that people had easy access to the requirements.
3. We scheduled classes for all appropriate people to reaffirm lockout requirements.
4. We implemented a poster campaign to market and sell the process to our workforce.
5. We developed lockout tool box topics so that we could communicate in a short meeting environment.
6. We talked about lockout in all meetings to raise awareness with multiple levels of the organization.
7. We distributed news articles that showed lockout-related accidents to provide the “real life” impact that the procedures can have.

Everywhere people turned, they saw our commitment to lockout procedures. The management team also re-emphasized the requirements and the consequences for noncompliance.

### Phase 2 – Monitoring & Coaching

The second seven days were dedicated to hands-on, “no fault” coaching and monitoring. Our “no fault” approach meant that we did not implement disciplinary actions in this phase because we wanted to give people an adequate time to comprehend our requirements before we executed our zero tolerance for lockout infractions. The process built on the progress we made with training and communications. The expectation was highly visible and we reinforced the message with consistent interaction with our leadership team and workforce. We took seven steps to reinforce our expectations.

1. We assembled a dedicated team of seven managers to serve as lockout coaches.
2. We designed a 10-point coaching card with talking points for coaches to use in the plant.

3. We required each coach to go into the plant and make seven coaching contacts each day.
4. They performed their seven contacts each day for seven consecutive workdays.
5. They documented and tracked their “no fault” observations.
6. We communicated the trends in meetings and plant tool box talks.
7. We clarified confusion and elevated awareness.

In phase two, the approach produced 343 lockout coaching and monitoring opportunities in a condensed time frame. The process built on the progress we made in phase one.

### Phase 3 – Instill Accountability

By the third week, employees had heard the message from seven different directions and they had experienced repetitive coaching and monitoring. Phase three was the “line in the sand” moment in the program. Noncompliance in the first two phases did not prompt any type of discipline because we used the opportunities to educate and coach. The third week was different. We assumed a zero tolerance position with non-compliance. You would think after 14 days of intense communication, methodical monitoring and hands-on coaching, all employees would believe in our commitment. That was not the case. On one occasion, we had to follow through with our zero tolerance policy and we terminated an employee that did not follow our lockout rules. We executed seven steps to instill accountability.

1. We assembled a dedicated team of seven managers to monitor compliance.
2. They used a simple 10 point scored audit card to evaluate lockout procedures in action.
3. We required each manager to perform seven assessments each day.
4. They performed assessments for seven consecutive workdays.
5. They documented their findings.
6. We communicated trends.
7. We administered disciplinary action for non-compliance.

After seven days of methodical communications and seven days of persistent coaching, the overwhelming majority of

the people understood the message. We exceeded normal training requirements beyond the class room with 343 coaching contacts and 343 lockout audits in the field. But, even with our accelerated campaign, we still had one person that took a chance and did not follow our rules. We had no choice but to terminate their employment. That was the only way they would get the message. That employee’s termination was the final confirmation to our workforce that we were fair but firm in our resolve to make our plant safer.

Change did not happen overnight but by the end of our 21-day seven on seven experiment, our employees could see and hear lockout in their dreams! I learned that you have to do more than just tell someone what you expect. You have to surround people with the message and you have to methodically introduce your ideas over and over with multiple participants. We inundated the workforce with our message and our lockout procedure application improved. There is nothing scientific about the process but I can assure you that repetition and motivation made a difference. ★



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#### References:

1. David Lynn, *Principle to Practice*, Walsh Printing, (2010)