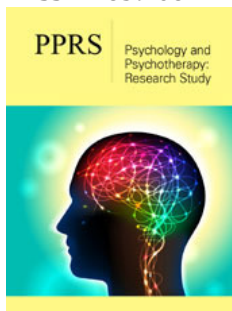


Unlocking Positive Change: Applied Behavior Analysis and the Looming Shadow of Tombstone Mentality

ISSN: 2639-0612



Matthew Temple¹ and Kristen Byra^{2*}

¹Independent Researcher, Indiana, USA

²Upskill ABA, USA

Commentary

Tombstone Mentality (TM) highlights a dangerous mindset that can have severe consequences in organizational settings [1]. In the aviation industry, tombstone mentality refers to administrators or decision-makers failing to address known issues or take proactive measures until a fatal accident occurs [1]. This neglectful attitude towards safety can lead to tragic consequences including loss of life. The term suggests that only when tombstones are erected for those who perished in accidents does the organization finally acknowledge and rectify the underlying problems [1]. Captain Hans Ulrich, the pilot of [2], possessed significant flying experience; however, he exhibited remarkable incompetence and lacked essential educational qualities [2]. This was evident in his consistent failure to pass exams required for upgrading his flight status, misunderstanding of navigational systems, and insufficient comprehension of basic flying procedures [2]. The crash investigation team concluded that although Captain Hans Ulrich had accumulated extensive years and hours of flying, experience does not always translate into competence [2]. One investigator suggested that flight competence cannot be determined solely based on the duration of one's career and flying hours [2].

By prioritizing profits over customer safety and allowing an inept pilot to operate a large aircraft, the organization contributed to the tragic loss of 26 lives, including Captain Hans Ulrich [2]. In applied behavior analysis, tombstone mentality reflects a similar mindset but with diverse circumstances. Here, the balance between profit, the well-being of employees and the quality of services provided needs to be harmonized. Tombstone mentality often ignores or dismisses work culture, turnover, and overall organizational health issues until the situation reaches a critical mass. At the organizational crisis stage, the organization may experience an imminent collapse, with high turnover rates, poor quality of service, and a dismissive culture. The parallel drawn between aviation tombstone mentality and its equivalent in applied behavior analysis shines a spotlight on the importance of proactive measures, a focus on safety and well-being, and the need for organizations to address concerns before they reach catastrophic levels. By failing to prioritize the necessary changes or adjustments, both industries risk suffering severe consequences that could have been addressed in a timely manner. Recognizing and addressing tombstone mentality in any field is crucial for an organizations' overall health and success. It involves creating a culture that values psychological safety, employee well-being, quality outcomes and maintaining open lines of communication to identify proactive measures to address issues.

***Corresponding author:** Kristen Byra, PhD, Upskill ABA, USA

Submission:  June 22, 2023

Published:  June 29, 2023

Volume 7 - Issue 2

How to cite this article: Matthew Temple and Kristen Byra*. Unlocking Positive Change: Applied Behavior Analysis and the Looming Shadow of Tombstone Mentality. Psychol Psychother Res Stud. 7(2). PPRS. 000656. 2023.

DOI: [10.31031/PPRS.2023.07.000656](https://doi.org/10.31031/PPRS.2023.07.000656)

Copyright@ Kristen Byra, This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Solutions to Tombstone Mentality

Several solutions can be implemented to combat the tombstone mentality in applied behavior analysis organizations and foster a proactive and supportive culture. First, organizational leaders must focus on employee well-being by creating an organizational culture that prioritizes employees' well-being and job satisfaction [3]. Employee well-being can be achieved by implementing fair compensation, offering professional growth and development opportunities, and providing a supportive work environment that encourages open communication. Regarding equitable remuneration, it is important for organizational leaders to move away from solely emphasizing billable hours and instead acknowledge and incentivize outstanding clinical results [4]. Second, organizational leaders must promote a culture of accountability by establishing organizational-wide responsibility [5,6]. Encouraging employees to report concerns or issues without fear of retribution fosters accountability at all levels of the organization by ensuring everyone is responsible for maintaining an empathetic and high-quality work environment [7].

Third, organizational leaders need to implement proactive risk assessment and mitigation strategies by conducting regular risk assessments to identify potential issues within the organization and service delivery [8]. Encouraging staff to proactively report and address risks can help implement strategies to mitigate identified risks and prevent escalation. Fourth, organizational leaders should foster a learning culture by creating an environment that values continuous learning and improvement [9]. Meaningful environments provide opportunities for professional development and promote horizontal hierarchies where power is more equally distributed and employees are partners rather than problems [9,10]. Fifth, organizational leaders should establish effective communication channels within the organization that are open, transparent, and accessible to all employees by implementing mechanisms for employees to provide feedback, share concerns, and suggest improvements [7,11]. Communicating organizational goals, expectations, and changes to all employees helps maintain clarity and alignment.

Sixth, organizational leaders should encourage collaboration and teamwork where individuals work together towards common goals [12]. Promoting interdisciplinary collaboration and communication among employees can remove barriers between departments and empower employees [13,14]. Seventh, organizational leaders should demonstrate and emphasize ethical practices by promoting adherence to professional standards within the organization [15]. Ensuring that ethical guidelines and standards are well-communicated, understood, and followed by all employees is essential for evading tombstone mentality in applied behavior analysis organizations.

Behavior analysts consistently utilize antecedent interventions as preventative measures to reduce undesirable behaviors with their clients as part of the client's behavior intervention plan. As a field, behavior analysts should apply our technology to the organizations they are employed to eliminate or at least reduce the factors that contribute to the tombstone mentality. However, some organizations need to be at the point where antecedent strategies will be effective. Alternatively, corrective measures will be necessary to restore an organizational culture that promotes and values employee well-being and client clinical excellence. Those in leadership positions must take steps to avoid the Tombstone mentality. If organizations reach the brink of collapse, the fallout will be more than just the behavior analysts and registered behavior technicians employed there. While those massive layoffs are tragic, the number of children and families who will find themselves with an abrupt loss of services with no recourse other than long waitlists will be catastrophic.

References

1. Lutte RK, Bowen BD (2000) The FAA: A tombstone agency? Putting the nickname to the test. *Aviation Institute Faculty Publications* 18(1): 12-25.
2. Mayday (2016) *Mayday-Failure in the Cockpit-Crossair* 3597.
3. Stringer H (2023) Worker well-being is in demand as organizational culture shifts. *2023 Trend Report* 54(1): 58-61.
4. Kohn A (1993) Why incentive plans cannot work. *Harvard Business Review* 71(5): 54-63.
5. Frankel AS, Leonard MW, Denham CR (2006) Fair and just culture, team behavior, and leadership engagement: The tools to achieve high reliability. *Health Services Research* 41(4): 1690-1709.
6. Yohn DL (2021) Company culture is everyone's responsibility. *Harvard Business Review*, USA.
7. Detert JR, Burris E (2016) Can your employees really speak freely? *Harvard Business Review* 94(1): 80-87.
8. McGowan J, Wojahn A, Nicolini JR (2023) *Risk management event evaluation and responsibilities*. Stat Pearls Publishing, USA.
9. Senge PM (2006) *The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization*, Doubleday. *Human Resource Management* 29(3): 343-348.
10. Block P (2013) *Stewardship: Choosing service over self-interest* (2nd edn), Berrett-Koehler Publishers, USA.
11. Bucata G, Rizescu AM (2017) The role of communication in enhancing work effectiveness of an organization. *Land Forces Academy Review* 22(1): 49-57.
12. Paulus PB, Baruah J, Kenworthy JB (2018) Enhancing collaborative ideation in organizations. *Frontiers in Psychology* 9: 1-12.
13. Chaleff I (2009) *Courageous followers: Standing up to and for our leaders* (3rd edn), John Wiley & Sons, USA.
14. Drucker PF, Hesselbain F, Kuhl JS (2015) *Peter Drucker's five most important questions*. Jossey-Bass, USA.
15. Sims RR (2003) *Ethics and corporate social responsibility: Why Giants Fall*. Praeger, USA.