

Dead Man's Test

If a dead man can do it, it ain't behavior, and if a dead man can't do it, then it is behavior.

Malott and Suarez (2003, p. 9)

The dead man test was devised by Ogden Lindsley in 1965 as a rule of thumb for deciding if something is a behavior. The need for such a test stems from the importance of focusing on what an organism actually *does* when attempting to understand or modify its behavior. It serves as a guideline for the identification of whether the "behavior" of interest could be performed or measurably demonstrated by a "dead man."

The question posed by the dead man's test is this: Can a dead man do it? If the answer is yes, it doesn't pass the dead man's test and it isn't a fair pair—for example "behave appropriately 80% of lunch hour"—then it is not a well written goal.

If the answer is no, you have a fair pair. For example:

Suppose that you wanted a fair pair target behavior for "swears at peers." Let's say that you came up with the target behavior "does not swear at peers." Does this pass the dead man's test? No. A dead man could refrain from swearing at peers. What would be better? How about "speaks to peers without swearing"? This passes the dead man's test because a dead man does not have the power to speak.