

Communication skills the key safe behaviour

Unsafe work environments have clear consequences for individuals and organisations



Perhaps the most commonly used marker for workplace safety is the occurrence of accidents – incidents at work that result in physical harm to people.

Although accidents clearly indicate an absence of safety, the question remains whether the absence of accidents actually means that safety is present.

Accidents are generally caused by a multitude of factors (e.g. unsafe behaviours, equipment failures, latent organisational weaknesses) that may or may not coincide to result in an accident.

For example, workers who may routinely ignore a safety protocol may do so precisely because there have been no or rare accidents in that area.

Research shows that safety-related work behaviours, rather than accident statistics, are the most accurate workplace safety indicators.

In essence, safe work behaviours are clearly linked to reduced likelihood of future harm, while unsafe work behaviours (intentional and unintentional) are linked to a greater likelihood of future harm.

The question that arises then is – what is key to creating a workplace safety culture where safe work behaviours are the ‘norm’? How does

one encourage and maintain those safe work behaviours?

Key to consistency in safety-related work behaviours are supervisors and team leaders. Research has shown again and again that they are the most important link to employee engagement, and that employee loyalty lies not to the organisation itself but with the work unit and especially the immediate supervisor / team leader.

Supervisors and team leaders are the primary communicators and reinforcement for safety-related issues. Although their impact is sometimes under-estimated, they are generally quite open to the idea that they can actively contribute to the presence of safety by engaging more with their teams.

However, team leaders frequently point out that the biggest obstacle to implementing these practices is time and an uncertainty about their own ability to convey the messages effectively and consistently. Thus, if management is unwilling to reduce paperwork and train supervisors in communication skills, nothing is likely to change.

We know that construction and infrastructure jobs are involved in complex activities where various stakeholders are present and work-

ing under constant challenges. Each job will have several safety and risk factors, requiring quality and safety management systems to be established, communicated, consistently reinforced and rewarded.

Personal power

The most influential safety factor is personal awareness followed closely by communication. In order to increase awareness, effectively manage error and maintain a safe working environment, employees and team leaders need to feel comfortable discussing non-routine issues in an open, free-flowing exchange of safety-related information.

The Individual Safety Attributes Test (ISAT) is a tool that helps identifying strengths and areas for improvement in safety communication skills and attitudes. Once the test results indicate the level to which relating safety-behaviour information, voicing safety concerns or clarifying and enforcing rules are likely strengths (or areas for improvement), steps can be taken to increase that individual’s communication skills.

There are multiple ways to increase supervisors’ and team leaders’ communication skills. Regardless of the method and the emphasis it takes, communication that builds relationships, cooperation and increases persuasiveness is typically based on 10 positive principles. Paying attention to any of those principles is a great way to start increasing your supervisors’ and team leaders’ communication skills and effectiveness

Ten positive principles

1. Ask, don’t tell – that avoids putting someone else down

Instead of ‘Do it this way,’ say ‘What we need you to do is...’

2. Focus on the solution or goal, not the problem

Instead of ‘That stuff is broken again,’ say ‘I’ll put in a maintenance request and follow up’

3. Turn can’t’s into cans

Instead of ‘We can’t do that until next week,’ say ‘We’ll be able to do that next week’

4. Take responsibility – don’t lay blame

Instead of ‘It’s not my fault,’ say ‘Here’s what I can do to fix that’

5. Say what you want, not what you do not want

Instead of ‘Don’t check your mobile until your break,’ say ‘You can check your mobile in your break’

6. Offer improvement suggestions

Instead of ‘Now you really messed that one up,’ say ‘Doing it this way and paying attention to that bit will get it working the way you want’

7. Focus on the future, don’t harp on with the past

Instead of ‘I told you before not to...,’ say ‘From now on, ...’

8. Turn complaints into requests

Instead of ‘You never/always...’ say ‘How about...?’

9. Share information rather than argue or accuse

Instead of ‘No, you are wrong,’ say ‘I see it like this...’

10. Don’t close doors, leave them open

Instead of ‘No, because...’ say ‘Yes, as soon as...’

Finally, don’t make assumptions about workplace safety behaviours – it’s far too dangerous. Make talking about it openly THE thing to do.



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