Communication & Safety

Effective communication and positive safety culture are two sides of the same coin.

The "How" of Workplace Communication

In everyday conversational situations, we may not often give much thought to *how* we are communicating. In other words, although we may have a good idea of what we want to say, we might not always think carefully first about the most effective way of saying it for our audience. This is normal, as we probably do not think about our spouse, child, co-worker, or supervisor as an "audience" who requires careful forethought to talk to. Plus, correcting ourselves or clarifying our points is a typical feature of conversation. But why is it so typical? Because we often do not consider our delivery until a misunderstanding occurs, and misunderstandings are common, because, as it says in this paragraph's first sentence, we often do not give adequate thought to *how* we are communicating.

Even though revising and clarifying ourselves is a regular feature of speech and most of us can do it adequately enough, one characteristic of a good communicator is the ability to minimize the need for it. Good communicators better consider their audiences' needs, expectations, and preferences in communicating. They effectively reduce the degree of clarification and revision of ideas or information that had already been conveyed. The consideration paid to the audience's needs and expectations leads to better engagement, and better engagement leads to better retention of content. This is crucial in safety-sensitive situations, to ensure important information like operating procedures and risk controls are correctly understood without need for additional clarification.

The connection between workplace incident rates and communication has been well-established.[1] The actions that employees take to reduce risks correlate to communication practices in the workplace. In other words, the better communication is, the better that workers act to mitigate risks and hazards.[1,2] In fact, a clear negative relationship exists between safety-related communication and occupational incidents.[1] When safety interactions between supervisors and workers improve, so too does workers' perception of their workplace's safety conditions and values.[1]

But high-hazard industries like construction and agriculture regularly employ people of diverse backgrounds whose language fluency, literacy skills, or learning styles may differ from that of their supervisors, the company's safety professionals, the management, and the language and/or reading level used in safety training and materials. Sooner or later, these facts become clear to safety professionals, who tend to not also be communication experts, and it can make preventing miscommunication a greater challenge than it may appear on the surface.

As a result, communication gaps and breakdowns are unfortunately common, even when much effort is made to try avoiding them:

> "Managers are often reminded of the need to communicate more with employees who say: 'No one tells us anything. We want to know what's going on. Newsletters, bulletins and emails are prepared and distributed and more staff meetings are held, and managers may feel they can say: 'We have told them.' Yet, somehow, the communication gaps remain."[3]

A common mistake is "to believe that simply presenting information will cause the desired effect... It is important to realize that people are emotional beings and that it is critical to sell them on programs and desired behavior."[4]

Meeting this challenge and enhancing safety communication in the workplace can be made easier when due consideration is given to the *how* of the communication—the way the information is con-

veyed for its audience—and not just the *what*. But determining the *how* must start with identifying the *who*, or the people with whom we are communicating.

Discourse Communities and Subcultures in the Workplace

A *discourse community* is any group of people among whom a particular style or method of communication is the expected norm. Discourse styles could be described as formal or informal, slangy or "proper," vulgar or clean; they can be laden with technical jargon and advanced vocabulary, or they can use simple language that young children could comprehend. Individuals often belong to many different discourse communities, depending on the circumstances of their communication, and these circumstances provide the parameters and expectations for that communication. (Shifting between different communities' communication styles is called *code-switching*.) For instance, Bert the refinery shift worker will likely speak to his crew mates differently than how he speaks to his four-year-old child at home, and both of those styles would likely differ from how he speaks to an authority figure like his boss. Each of these scenarios represent a different discourse community to which Bert belongs, depending on whom he is talking to.

Research and empirical evidence show that frontline workers tend to be culturally isolated from their operations' leadership. The reasons for this are not difficult to grasp: first, members of the two groups are often from different backgrounds, and second, in many companies, the two rarely interact.

> "The phenomenon of being isolated from continuous management supervision has led...to observable workplace 'frontline' subcultures, with traits that distinguished these subcultures from the majority culture of their organizations."[5]

Discourse communities that are isolated from other communities, like workforces and their management often are, have unique characteristics and expectations that may not translate. Put simply, because of cultural differences between groups, communication between them can become "lost in translation" because the groups do not interact regularly. When this happens, the audience will be unreceptive, at best finding the information dull, but likely also inauthentic and insincere.

A common example of this when a safety system is over-reliant on slogans and catchphrases that may be well-intentioned but are otherwise generic and empty, like "Safety First" or "Think Safety." "To avoid confusion, there must be a clear understanding of what the company is trying to achieve when it comes to safety."[1]

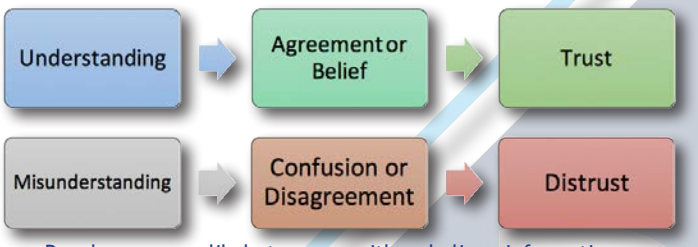
When workers do not take safety communication seriously or are unclear about its meaning, they can view such materials as "an obstacle that gets in the way of them performing their tasks efficiently and productively."[7] Consequently, the likelihood that a workforce will forego the safe operating procedures disseminated by unseen leadership is significantly higher, for two main reasons: 1) They find the information difficult to understand because it was not crafted or delivered appropriately for them; and 2) They may find the information difficult to follow, if not entirely inapplicable, because it is not informed by first-hand knowledge of the job or the work environment, as found by researchers Teague, Leith, and Green:

> "[Workers] came to their own understanding of the meaning of safety and developed their own solutions to the hazards that threatened them in their daily and nightly work."[5]

An "Exchange of Meaning"

Communication is more than giving and receiving information, it is an "exchange of meaning."[3] When different parties accurately share understanding of communication's meaning, a foundation for trust is established. The concept is simple: people are more likely to agree with what they

understand. So, if they members of a workforce disagree with certain safety measures, it may mean that the measures are difficult to understand or follow—their meaning has been lost in translation. If the members of the workforce distrust a supervisor, it may mean the supervisor's communication methods are somehow obscuring his meaning. If safety materials are ignored, they may not convey the information appropriately for the intended workers.



People are more likely to agree with or believe information that they can understand. Agreement or belief then leads to trust in the information's source. When communication breaks down, it can lead to distrust between groups.

Given that diversity of age, ethnicity, background, literacy, and education is commong among workers in blue-collar industries, communication breakdowns and lapses in accurate exchanges of meaning can occur frequently. It is easy to overlook that communication methods may not be commensurate with a workforce's communication needs, especially when the workforce is diverse and comprises different discourse communities. Identifying and understanding the ways in which an operation's existing communication patterns and styles affect its safety system can benefit it substantially.

The key to effective safety-related communication is to give due attention to the exchange of meaning, not just the imparting of it. The first step in meeting workers' needs requires only asking and listening to what they are. "While safety professionals need to impart information to people in their organizations, asking questions and listening attentively is equally important."[4]

Conscious application of better communication methods can over time instill the habits indicative of positive safety cultures, both at the majority culture level as well as within its smaller subcultures and internal discourse communities. This occurs principally because, when communication lines are open between the frontline workers and their management, frontline workers' input can add useful, practical value to the operations' safety procedures, and thus, the cultural divisions that might exist can become, at the least, more permeable.

References

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