

TOOLBOX TALK #1

COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE OF SAFETY?

Winston Churchill once remarked that the difference between leadership and management was communication. Supervisors understand this principle very well – they’ve learned how little great plans matter if you don’t effectively articulate them. Still many leaders find safety communication to be difficult. Several practices can help leaders develop a mission-oriented approach to communication.

Challenge your own point of view

What we believe shapes what – and how – we communicate. When leaders default to a tactical point of view (i.e., safety is just about reducing injuries), they necessarily narrow what they say. Many leaders with an unexamined point of view tend to focus on numbers, discrete efforts and other tasks – important topics, but seldom inspiring. Ask yourself what you really believe safety to be, how safety happens, and what it would mean both now and in the future.

Paint the big picture

Instilling a sense of mission means helping people understand what that mission is. Employees need to understand what safety means to the organization, not just how the organization is performing against this year’s goal. See if you can describe the safety goal without referring to numbers, rates or regulation.

Give people the background

Safety communication involves discussion about tasks and tactics. Effective leaders use these discussions as opportunities to “connect the dots” back to the big picture. They help people understand the reason behind the practices; for example, explaining the background for a new rule, what it means and why it’s important to them.

Make exposures, not outcomes, the major theme

Actionable communication is effective communication. Although lagging indicators are the predominant topic in many organizations, they also are the least actionable. Engage people with your communications by emphasizing exposures. Present employees with challenges (We had a near-miss; what could we do to prevent this?) and ideas (How could we redesign this to be safer in the future?) and ask for input.

Be transformational

How you communicate is just as important as what you communicate. Use optimistic language, challenge old ideas, coach others and be constructive in what you say. Most of all, always practice active and respectful listening.

