

Communicating Health and Safety Issues in Training: from Basics to Board Level

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“To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others”.

--Anthony Robbins, American Author

Introduction

Although hard to define precisely, effective communication is acknowledged as an art in its own right. This is widely recognised and reflected in health and safety appointments for practitioners where: ‘excellent communication skills’, ‘ability to communicate with managers’, ‘excellent oral and written communication skills’, ‘an outstanding communicator’ and ‘strong interpersonal communication skills’, are but a sample of advertised requirements.

For health and safety trainers effective communication needs to be finely tuned and developed to meet wide ranging audiences at different levels and abilities. This presentation is a collection of effective techniques that reflects the experience of facing a multitude of audiences who, when asked why they have attended a course, respond in unison with ‘I was told to’, and sadly also often possess the misconception that health and safety is an imposition and training is an ordeal to sit through!

The challenge faced by the trainers is to ensure that delegates, when asked at the end of the course whether they would attend future courses or recommend the particular course to their colleagues, answer ‘yes’. Without effectively engaging and interesting them in the topic through varied communication techniques, this is unlikely to be achieved.

In order to provide a balanced overview of communication techniques, the presentation undertakes a ‘journey’ that incorporates written, oral, visual, graphic, audible and practical examples. This paper reflects the themes and principles used, but should not be considered in isolation or as a replacement for attendance at the session it supports, as, although the written format can provide background knowledge and understanding, the real benefit comes through attendance, participation and the ‘hands on’ experience provided.

The author’s talk will seek to highlight communication issues encountered in training, with practical examples of techniques and methods that, with some thought and creativity, are readily available at little or no cost to trainers. It is intentionally generic, focussing on the methods used,

rather than a particular topic or issue. Communicating health and safety is approached from 'outside the box' to provoke reaction and generate and stimulate interest, from which specific issues and discussions could then be progressed at a later stage within full training sessions.

The whole concept is a 'low-cost, no frills' approach to communication and training that, with innovation and imagination, can be: used to develop or design specific training; used in conjunction with existing training packages; or even simply used to provide short, sharp topic updates.

A learning journey of communication

The journey starts with communication, something that we are often so bad at doing. How often do we stand at bus stops, travel on trains, sit in waiting rooms, and walk down corridors without ever acknowledging any other person around us?

It is very easy to assume communication 'just happens' and perhaps we feel that if we sit and watch, then everything will fall into place. However in reality, communication does not just happen, it actually takes considerable effort and skill from all parties and involves talking, listening, body language, mannerism, behaviour, attitude and appearance. We need to understand and appreciate how we perceive, and why we react to, the key aspects of personal communication.

Facilitating agreement

Part of this effort and skill of communication is actually in gaining agreement to topics under discussion, especially in courses and meetings where opinions will be varied and arguments need to be presented in a clear, confident and persuasive manner. Getting initial agreement will enable everyone to set out on a journey together and eventually (however slowly) reach the goal destination.

A very simple visual example, using counting to facilitate agreement, highlights how easy it is to forget that people view things differently, even when presented before them in 'black and white', and how the concept of always presenting a 'coloured picture' is important to providing understanding and achieving an informed agreement. Too often people assume others see things in the same manner, where indeed, as individuals our perceptions and understanding are very different. This exercise is a useful metaphor for illustrating the importance of giving full and unbiased information to people so that they can form a balanced judgement.

Direction, leadership and support

No journey will be successful if it lacks direction. However there is a distinct difference in providing direction and actually leading the journey. It is important for health and safety practitioners, as experts in their own field, to provide the direction, but still to facilitate the process of ensuring senior management has 'ownership' of the journey and are the decision-makers and leaders. The leaders may not actually drive themselves and may opt to appoint a 'chauffeur' instead. However, they remain firmly in charge of the pace of the journey.

Too often, health and safety individuals fall into the trap of giving direction and then trying to drive the journey and subsequently can end up on a lone journey without effective leadership,

backing or support. A simple example considers the question “and how do you think you are doing”, to which the reply often is “I think I am doing very well, but, I don’t know where I am going” to highlight the importance of direction, routes and destinations.

The right journey for the right person

On any journey, fellow travellers will each have their own needs and it is important to recognise equality, but also to respect differences; we are unquestionably different in all manner of ways, from gender, age, race, religion, size, shape, ability, personality, intelligence, experience and common sense. The ‘common sense’ issue is not something we inherit or are born with, rather it is actually something we need to learn. To quote Frank Lloyd Wright (American Architect 1868-1959), “There is nothing more uncommon than common sense” Understanding the concept of common sense is crucial to answer many sceptics and critics who believe safety is simply common sense anyway so why should we make all the fuss and bother. Examples of ‘common sense’ only being common once we have learnt it, focuses on some basic principles of how we have learnt things from childhood, and how we continue to learn in a working environment.

The journey then changes to a ‘general outing’ and visits to different areas and examples of communicating techniques where a variety of media and graphics are used, as follows:

a) Photographs: portraying human behaviour

There are few things as good as examples for generating discussion, and people are more willing to be open and vocal when they have something visual to discuss. Most health and safety professionals use photographic images to highlight good and bad practice and they are often freely available from magazines and on websites. ‘In-house’ examples, though readily available, require careful judgement (and maybe permission) regarding possible use, as: individuals may feel ‘targeted’; there needs to be sensitivity to investigations; and people may be less prepared to comment or criticise their colleagues.

b) Images: as comparisons of wrong and right practices and gender differences

These can be graphics, computer generated etc. The images used are x-ray images to show posture problems from the inside out, highlighting how we can cover up potential problems with the camouflage of clothes.

c) Mpegs: taking unrelated issues to generate discussion for risk assessments and the term “reasonably foreseeable”

People often use ‘safety images’ for safety talks, however, it’s also possible to use television clips from documentaries, news programmes, etc. to discuss a topic that may be a step away from the working environment, but the principles and concepts are equally applicable. For example, there is a limit to how many ways you can trip over a box, yet there are plenty of ‘trip’ clips that can generate discussions and illustrate the principles and importance of housekeeping, appropriate footwear, etc.

d) Photographs: to highlight the nature of a specific injury, where perhaps ‘gruesome’ pictures may be used effectively

In general, the author would not personally advocate the use of ‘real injury’ images, unless they are job-specific and / or depict apparently minor injuries with potentially serious consequences, to reinforce the message and highlight the need for prompt emergency treatment. Examples such as injection injuries or insect bites that deteriorate rapidly could be considered appropriate, as the

outcome is identifiable and deterioration consistent. Random examples of graphic injuries have varied audience reactions and should be used with great care, though arguably they can be beneficial when linked to an individual case study that discusses the entire event and outcomes. Education by shared experience is a powerful tool for influencing individuals.

e) In house video: "It is only a bit of sodium and water!" showing the benefits of using real life incidents for open discussions

If things do go wrong, it's always important to learn from mistakes and use the information positively to ensure that incidents are highlighted and communicated to others who might undertake practices or use equipment that produced the failure, to help prevent recurrence.

f) Macro media flash: specific designs – how much can be conveyed in a 60-second message

Too often we talk for too long. Sometimes short sharp messages that imprint on the brain are far more effective. After all, how many television commercials do we remember simply because they 'stick in our minds'? In terms of public safety, people in the UK of a certain age will well remember the 'Clunk, click every trip' slogan used in the 1970s to encourage the use of seat belts in cars for all journeys, before it became a legal requirement in 1983. Equally in many countries there are some very hard hitting 'Don't drink and drive' commercials.

Summary

Design to delivery - *innovative, inexpensive training techniques*

If anyone reading this has infinite training resources...congratulations! The author feels you're in the minority and must be the envy of the overwhelming majority, struggling to provide suitable training within a reasonable budget. However, even those with large resources need to ensure that training is communicated effectively throughout all levels and may benefit from using additional ideas and materials.

For those that like to review the theory of training there are many studies and research papers available that outline the effectiveness of training. This paper does not intend to identify individual studies or research but supports the overall view that the more engaging and participative the training the more effective the outcomes. In general terms: listening, seeing and doing are essential for an effective outcome and supports that this is the best combination to maintain interest and create understanding. Training design should ensure these activities are balanced and delivered within a suitable time frame.

Equally the old adage 'practice makes perfect' highlights the need for an element of repetition, which is again supported by many trainers adopting the approach, 'tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you have told them' because that way they have a greater chance to remember. But, it is also noteworthy to remember that practice in variation is also important, because that is what develops the skill of flexibility. So, similarly that playing ball and always catching to the same point does not develop an ability to catch randomly delivered balls, training to the same single scenario would not develop abilities to deal with variations of scenarios.

Making training 'fun' - *enjoyment and participation, not boredom and compliance*

This is perhaps the hardest task facing any trainer: to make the subject 'fun'. Training at a level where people have volunteered and actually want to be part of courses (specific students who choose their own courses) is considerably easier than being faced with individuals who (for whatever reason) would rather be anywhere else. These 'reluctant' individuals can range from board level to shop floor level and the reasons behind their 'aversion' can be as equally diverse, ranging from lack of understanding of relevance, to fear of humiliation, embarrassment or failure in examined topics.

People who only attend courses or talks for the sake of being there and getting a certificate, or being signed-off for attendance, will benefit little or not at all, unless they can be 'converted' during the training session itself. Positive health and safety messages won't be conveyed by poor and boring compulsory courses, which can add to low morale and a negative safety culture.

Courses must be designed for the audience and be relevant to what they do, though this doesn't mean that you can't 'broaden' the topic away from the set routines within work, to issues in the outside world. Relating to current affairs, media activity, magazine articles, television broadcasts, etc. can add a wealth of interest, as can the experience and knowledge of attendees. It is important to remember that communication is reciprocal and we can all always learn from each other; listening is often as important as speaking. Courses that are interactive and encourage audience participation can be effective with all sizes of audience, from small to large groups. Participation can be facilitated through interaction via paper or electronic quizzes (the latter for well-funded and equipped trainers). Rewards for 'winners' may generate competitive interest and can help incentivise people to listen, especially if the 'answers' are given during the presentation. Simple techniques, effective outcomes.

Leadership – *direction, involvement and motivation*

Senior managers are responsible for the leadership and co-ordination of an organisation's major activities. However, leaders need direction and, as they can't be experts within every single field relevant to the organisation, will sometimes require professional advice. This is where health and safety professionals come in; the challenge for most of us is to make an impact and be recognised in the first instance. Having risen to this challenge, it's then important not to fall at the first fence, but to communicate in a way that encourages and motivates involvement; presents a very persuasive argument; and establishes us as key players in the process.

The argument for occupational safety and health (OSH) is far more effective when supported by a strong and well presented business case, which, in itself would make an interesting paper and presentation! However, as a brief reminder, the case needs to be convincing to gain the necessary resources and drive improving OSH standards and be presented in clear language, understood by all parties. At a basic level, it means proving the 'economic argument' for the proposals. To do this, data is needed (e.g. accident and absence costs) on how much OSH failure is costing, or is likely to cost, the organisation. The business case involves demonstrating that failure to manage the OSH risk could threaten business objectives or even survival (e.g. a major incident involving deaths and substantial reputational damage); that the intervention(s) concerned is effective and will prove to be cost neutral or to actually save money in terms of preventing uninsured losses; and that improvements in OSH can also lead to improvements in other areas such as quality and service delivery, e.g. good housekeeping to prevent slips and trips, also leading to increased productivity because time is not wasted searching for key work items and

good reputation for OSH, helping organisations to secure investment and business and to recruit and retain high calibre staff.

Conclusion

As we have explored, communication can either turn people on or off a subject. Hopefully, we can all remember gifted teachers at school who helped inspire us with a life-long love of a particular subject. It's hard to overstate the importance of conveying enthusiasm and actively involving your audience. Learning new and useful skills should be enjoyable and should make us feel better about ourselves. Health and safety trainers need to ensure we turn people on to health and safety and should use all means at our disposal to make the training experience as engaging and memorable (for the right reasons) as possible. The journey described is not just one for the delegate; it's also one for the trainer. So, it's important to elicit and act on feedback both during and after training sessions, to ensure we've been properly understood and have communicated as well as we'd hoped. And a final thought...

“It's not just what you say; it's the way that you say it – that's the art of communication”

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© www.sw-asse.org/Hydraulic%20Injection%20Injury%20learning.pps

...and to all others who provided links to sites, graphics and materials yet to be used.

Some useful websites

The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health <http://www.iosh.co.uk>

The Safety and Health Practitioner (magazine) <http://www.shponline.co.uk>

The Health and Safety Executive <http://www.hse.gov.uk>