



THE WAY TO INVITE PEOPLE INTO A CONVERSATION IS NOT BY MAKING STATEMENTS, BUT BY ASKING QUESTIONS.

STARTING A SAFETY CONVERSATION

Good communication starts with a strategy of what needs to be communicated and tactics for how that will be accomplished.

Over the decades, I have only worked with a handful of organizations that had excellent safety communication. Even when leaders have good intentions to communicate safety, they tend to fall short of their own expectations. Often, this is because intentions are all they have. Good communication starts with a clear strategy of what needs to be communicated and exact tactics for how that will be accomplished.



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The root cause of most communication failures I encounter lies in setting the strategic goals. Leaders tell me their workers are uninformed and that their goal is to keep them more informed. Usually in another conversation, leaders ask me to help get their workers more engaged in safety. I find that these goals can be combined.

The overall strategic goal should be worker engagement, and the primary tactic for accomplishing that goal should be communication. But communication needs to be more than simply disseminating information. That means everyone needs to be invited into a conversation about safety.

The way to invite people into a conversation is not by making statements but by asking questions. Communication experts often cite three qualities of effective communication: clear, non-threatening and two-way. Conversations facilitate all three of these qualities better than sent messages. If the original message is not clear, a conversation can provide clarification. A sent message can be perceived as a command or dictate even if it is not intended as such.

Conversations allow perceived threats to be defused. When messages are sent, there is no

easy way to determine if it was received. In conversations, the receipt of information can be determined by body language or by follow-up questioning if necessary.

W. Edwards Deming told us that people support what they help create. Being involved in the conversation gives everyone a chance to help create the basic ideas upon which actions may be based. Leaders who ask questions are perceived to be more open to ideas and collaborative than leaders who speak without listening in return. Getting input from others is not just good communication—it is a sign of respect. Additionally, others often have knowledge about specifics that leaders do not, and that knowledge can help them make better and more practical decisions.

I recently talked to organizational leaders who were boastful and proud of the improvements they had made to one department at their site. When I spoke with workers from that department, they told me that leaders had not asked them about the improvements and many of them had created more problems than they solved. The net result was millions of dollars spent that complicated work and demotivated the workforce. All of this is easily avoided by a simple conversation.

A common barrier to an effective flow of information is the subordinate who does not want to be the bearer of bad news to the boss. To address this, many organizations require leaders have what is commonly called skip-level meetings. These are meetings in which the boss skips the direct reports and has a meeting with the next lower level in the organization.

Skip-level meetings are only effective if they foster a conversation. If the boss simply lectures the attendees with the same directives given to direct reports, no new insights are gained. Savvy bosses ask the right questions to uncover the information that may be withheld. That helps remove the threat that may make attendees feel uncomfortable sharing information and ideas openly and creates an atmosphere of trust.

Some organizational leaders tell me they are already good at asking questions and getting input from others. However, I often find that

their questions are all about tactics, not strategy. The leader decides on a goal or direction and simply asks others to fill in the blanks on how that might be accomplished in their departments or regions. Contributing to tactics creates a level of ownership and engagement but contributing to the rationale behind the decisions takes engagement and ownership to a whole new level. Deciding what to do gets hands and feet moving. Deciding why to do it gets hearts and minds involved and connected to the organization.

The most effective safety strategies are the ones to which all key leaders have contributed, and the best way to get such contributions is through asking questions. Some questions I often recommend include: “Why do we want to be more excellent in safety?” “How would the organization benefit from better safety?” and “How can we keep safety and production from competing with each other for priority?” Those who contribute to such conversations feel a deeper ownership and pride in the performance that results from the strategy.

Most organizations are attempting some form of audits or behavioral observations as a part of their safety activities. One of the goals of such processes is to increase employee engagement. However, the most difficult part of such audits or observations is giving feedback on what was observed and getting information from the workers being observed that can help improve safety.

Observer training should include strategies for fostering a conversation between observers and the person/people being observed. Observers need a list of potential questions to ask at the end of an observation. Truly good questions will spawn conversations among employees even after or between observations, and those discussions will flow over to safety meetings and pre-job planning sessions.

Plato and Aristotle were two of the most famous philosophers of the Golden Age in Greece. Aristotle proposed all the answers, and his thinking has been superseded many times over by advancements in thinking and technology. Plato asked the deep questions underlying our life decisions, and his questions remain pertinent today. He told us the unexamined life is not worth living. The unquestioned safety strategies might equally not be worth pursuing. Start a conversation and talk about it! **EHS**

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