

Communicating safety: Can I get a receipt?

Written by Shawn M. Galloway
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Ineffective communication is at the root of most problems, personal and business. We must realize that our ability to successfully connect with others is a core competency of effective performers.

Communication is but one element of a successful and sustainable safety program. Moreover, communicating a message alone (i.e., email, talk at safety meeting, posting on bulletin board, etc.), does not guarantee knowledge transfer, behavioural change or results. It only ensures documentable information-sharing activities once occurred. At some point, most people have had a safety document placed in front of them and been asked to sign that they have read and understood the information. I call this exchange a “receipt of safety communication”.

While coaching an executive during a review of their incidents, training and communication effectiveness, the following was shared with me: “I don’t get it. I personally trained him earlier this year on that equipment. I even have the documentation to prove that he was trained. What’s more, when we updated the procedure after the recent process change, his supervisor showed me his signature where he signed off on it during the safety meeting last month. I just don’t understand how he got hurt when he was told what to do.” Does any of this sound familiar?

This well-intentioned leader was experiencing a common frustration voiced by many of her peers. The late English poet, G.K. Chesterton, once said, “It isn’t that they can’t see the solution. It’s that they can’t see the problem.” Many of us experience difficulties in improvement, not because of our abilities in progressive thinking and problem-solving; it is our ability to frame the problem accurately.

The real problems are the following:

- Communication is but one element of training

While this appears to be common knowledge, it is unfortunately not considered in common practice. After auditing the effectiveness of many types of safety training and program implementation, it was discovered that training is reduced over time to shared information only. While communication is a foundational component of training, it serves as the vehicle for information, not the destination.

Training effectiveness should never be judged solely by the audiences’ perception of the messenger’s capabilities or training content. The effectiveness of training should be measured by how it changed or maintained the knowledge levels and behaviours of the trainees, and how this affected company performance.

- Communication is a process, not an event

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There is a common joke among marketing professionals: “You can tell someone something seven times, and they will tell you they heard it once.” Just because information has flowed from you once, does not ensure the message was received. Communication is not what the information sender does; it’s what happens within the receiver.

Effective communication requires both a sender and a receiver, who equally need to be tuned-in and turned-on to the message. Emailing someone a message does not guarantee it will be read, nor remembered. If you disagree, consider attempting to remember the details of the last few emails from your direct supervisor.

- Obtaining a signature for receiving a message only guarantees documentation

Simply put, asking someone to sign that they have read and understood a document without seeking validation of understanding through a discussion, does not guarantee knowledge transfer, behavioural change or results. It only ensures documentation, and surely this is not the all-encompassing goal.

All of us have experienced the effect of what we believe was successfully communicated; yet comprehension didn’t take place, at least not completely. The Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw, once quipped, “The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

Don’t work under assumptions or illusions when it comes to something as important as safety. If people are unable to recall elements of your message, did communication really take place?

Seek to validate the effectiveness of your safety communication by testing for comprehension, observing for behaviours that reflect the communicated message, and measuring how these two areas contribute to overall performance.

Communicating effectively has proven to contribute to gains in all areas of operational performance. Starting with improving safety communication will not only add value to the areas of culture and performance, it is also the right thing to do.

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