



## Sticky Stories are Safety Savvy

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If you make the information you are sharing personal, by telling anecdotes about real people and their safe and unsafe acts and the consequences, employees won't forget your message.

On a cold and windy day, a worker crossing a street at his workplace was struck and killed by a truck. The driver said he was backing the truck because an exit was blocked and he never saw the worker. It looked as if the worker had been holding his coat up to block the cold wind and did not see the truck. It was speculated that the worker was used to traffic coming from the other direction and may have looked that direction, and not toward the backing truck. No one witnessed the event.

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Safety professionals and the supervisor conducted an investigation and concluded that certain corrective actions were warranted. They unblocked the exit and changed the design of the gate to ensure that trucks would not need to back out of the street. They also concluded that workers should wear reflective vests while working at sites where vehicles and pedestrians both were present. The use of the vest became a new rule.

Safety managers announced the new policy of wearing reflective vests at other sites and were met with stiff resistance. Workers did not want to wear the vests and resented being ordered to do so. They did not see the need for the vests and thought they would be uncomfortable and unattractive. Safety managers related the story of the accident to justify the new rule, but workers took exception and said that it was an overreaction and would not improve safety.

However, at one site, the safety manager held a meeting and simply told the story of the accident to the workers. He showed photos of the worker and his wife and children. He expressed his sympathy and his desire that no such tragedy would ever happen to any worker at his site. He asked the workers what they could do to make sure they never had such an accident. The workers suggested wearing reflective vests as one possibility and welcomed the new rule as a sensible precaution.

When asked about the reason for the rule on reflective vests a year later, only a few workers at the resistant sites could remember the story of the accident. The workers from the site that began with the story could recite the story in great detail.

## Stories Are Impactful

There are several reasons for the difference in both the acceptance and remembering of the information from the accident report. For one thing, stories are sticky; they are more memorable and stick in our minds better than other types of information, such as conclusions and corrective measures. Some of the greatest communicators from religion and philosophy have used stories, such as parables and fables, to make their points. Most of us can remember the story and the story reminds us of the lesson, which is more likely to

impact our behavioral decisions.

The story-first approach is better is because people react to change emotionally before they react logically. The story evokes the emotion, whereas information or conclusions evoke logical responses. Mandates often cause negative emotional reactions that logic cannot overcome. Getting the emotional response right is critical to creating acceptance of change and also adds to the sticky factor of memory.



Another reason stories are more sticky is the similarity of stories to personal experience. Our experience was not analyzed and handed to us as a set of conclusions. We had the experience (the story) and we discovered the lessons (from the experience). Most communications about accidents begin, and often end, with conclusions and preventative measures. If we are lucky, we will finally get to the description or narrative of what happened. If there is no narrative, there is little to no retention of the information and no resulting change in behavior.

If we start with the conclusions and corrective actions, we are trying to force workers to agree that the conclusions are accurate and have some chance of fixing the problem. But what if the conclusions don't seem logical from the narrative or appear to be aimed at fixing the blame instead of fixing the problem? In either case, the conclusions are ours and not the worker's. The worker did not discover the conclusions.

Many learning theories suggest that we should follow this model of going from general to specific, i.e., tell the conclusion and reinforce it with a specific story. However, we have found that the exact opposite approach can enhance retention and application. Recent research into how certain groups of people learn and retain information best, as well as our own projects, suggest that "telling" conclusions is ineffective in conveying a message that is retained and results in behavioral change.

There is another principle at work here, what Deming described when remarking that people tend to support what they help create. A conclusion can be the creation of the worker and, if it is, the conclusion will be much more likely to get the necessary support to turn into meaningful action.

The goal of reporting accident and near-miss data to workers should be to make a lasting impression that improves safety performance. The whole scenario should evoke both emotional and cognitive responses that lead to concrete behavioral change. Historians say that if we don't learn lessons from history, we are doomed to repeat it. A simple change in the way we communicate can drastically improve the way we learn lessons from our accident history.

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