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Communication: The bedrock of
leadership and safety

This resource is part of SAIF's leadership project, which is meant to help employers and leaders of organizations establish strong and sustainable safety cultures using research-based concepts and strategies.

Communication breakdowns

The tips in this handout are meant to help you avoid a communication breakdown, but there are so many factors that even the best communicators occasionally get it wrong. Here's what to do when that happens:

- Don't react immediately to prevent an emotional response

- Take some deep breaths—this takes your brain out of fight or flight mode

- Ask for more time if you need it

- Listen to the other person's perspective

- Respond with understanding

- Apologize if your actions or words led to the breakdown

- End with an agreed upon solution to the issue

A hotel company tasked a traveling group of maintenance employees with running new cable to various rooms. Their main access point was a floor opening in a housekeeping closet. The group failed to notify the general manager or housekeeping that they were working. After they started working, a housekeeper entered the storage closet to retrieve a cart. She fell through the floor opening and was badly injured.

Companies that struggle to develop a strong safety culture, have high injury rates, or fail to retain quality employees often have one thing in common: poor communication. Communication is the key to positive leadership and an overall strong safety culture. Injuries occur because communication didn't happen, or it was unclear, and the receiver never fully understood the message.

How do we communicate?

Most experts agree there are four main types of communication: verbal, non-verbal, written, and visual. All of them communicate feelings and attitudes about the topic, whether intended or not.

Dr. Albert Mehrabian's landmark study explains how we convey these feelings and attitudes when communicating:
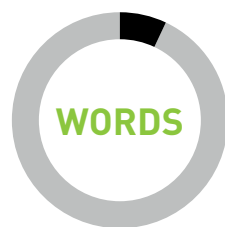
WORDS		
7%	**38%**	**55%**
The words we use	How we say it (tone of voice)	What we look like when we say it. What does our body language tell the other person?

If you tell someone they need to wear safety glasses, can that be misinterpreted? Think of how you could say it to convey a different meaning and then think of the different ways you could look when you say it. Pointing a finger, frowning, or using a dismissive tone can all impact the way the message is received.

Communication has changed

Communicating with others started as talking face-to-face, but technology advancements have added email, texting, and virtual meetings to the mix. When you're not communicating face-to-face, the person receiving your communication will naturally add emotion to the information they receive.

Here's an example:

> **"** I need you to come to my office first thing in the morning to discuss your handling of a safety concern. **"**

How would you react if you received this by email or text? Is it positive or negative? If you are the sender of that email, how could you change or add wording to better convey your message? It pays to take a little extra time when crafting written communications to make sure you're sending the right message.

Listening

Listening skills are also extremely important to improving communication. There are several barriers to effective communication. Here are some ideas for improving listening skills:

- Avoid distractions (put your phone away)
- Focus on the person (show them they are important to you)
- Take notes if needed

Ways to improve communication

There isn't one right way to improve communication, and the most important thing to do is practice. Here are some suggestions to help you get it right:

- Use face-to-face communication for important conversations (when possible)
- Employ multiple training methods, especially for critical information
- Allow for questions and two-way interactions
- Ask for feedback to make sure the other person understands
- Listen fully to understand the other person
- Use a translator if there is a language barrier

Communicating well is something leaders work at every day. It is a delicate balance of personality, perceptions, and messages. Learning about communication is an important first step to becoming an effective leader.

The power of feedback

Giving feedback is an important part of communication, especially for leaders. Here's some ideas for effective feedback:

Positive feedback

- Give specific examples of observed behavior
- Include specific qualities that contribute to success
- State the benefit to you, the team, or the company

Constructive feedback

- Prepare before meeting
- Identify the expected outcome
- Anticipate the employees' points of view
- Select the time and location
- Describe the situation
- Explain the problem it causes
- Understand the employees' points of view
- Involve employees in problem solving

Activity ideas

- Group discussion: talk about communication in your workplace. Are there areas you are doing well? Are there areas where you can improve?

- Learn more about effective communication. Search for communication articles from reputable sources and read them to get ideas on improving your effectiveness. Share them with other company leaders or discuss them in your work team.

- If you aren't sure how to improve safety communication:

  Step 1: Get a baseline by counting the number of times you currently communicate with your employees about safety.

  Step 2: Set a goal to increase this number. Choose something that will be obtainable and noticeable to your employees. Depending on your organizational structure and the work you do, it might be reasonable to set a goal for one safety contact per person per day.

  Step 3: Track and record the number of contacts you make until you are routinely meeting your goal.