Communication Strategies for Achieving a Total Safety Culture

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Introduction

One of the most effective ways to improve a safety culture and prevent injuries is to optimize safety-related communication throughout an organization (Williams, 2003). Unfortunately, employees often fail to “speak up” when they observe risky behaviors even when they know they should. The Safety Culture Survey administered to hundreds of organizations by Safety Performance Solutions, Inc (SPS) indicates 90% of respondents believe employees should caution others when they're operating at-risk. However, only 60% say they actually do provide this critical feedback.

During training and structured interviews, we ask employees why there's such a gap between people's values (“should caution”) and actual behaviors (“do caution”). Participants respond that giving safety-related feedback will create interpersonal conflict. “It's not our job to give safety feedback”. Also, they often do not feel competent at giving safety feedback, and/or they don't want to insult coworkers who have more experience (Geller & Williams, 2001).

It's unfortunate employees are reluctant to warn coworkers when they observe risky behaviors, especially considering that most injuries have a behavioral component (along with system factors; Geller, 2001, 2005, 2008). Ironically, people underestimate others' willingness to receive safety feedback. In fact, 74% of respondents (from the SPS Safety Culture Survey) confirm they welcome peer observations for the purposes of receiving safety-related feedback. Yet, only 28% believe other employees feel the same way.

Employees will be more open to safety-related feedback if coworkers do a better job of providing and receiving it. Here are some guidelines for providing effective corrective feedback to others when they are working at-risk:

- Don't make it personal – focus on behavior.
- Ask questions to facilitate discussion (Don't lecture!)
- Give feedback immediately and one-on-one.
- Show genuine concern for others’ feelings/well being.
- Work together to find better solutions.
- Thank the person for listening.

Here are some points to consider when receiving corrective feedback effectively:

- Actively listen and don't interrupt.
- Remain open and receptive. Don't get defensive.
- Discuss better ways of doing the task.
- Thank the person for providing feedback.
In addition to cautioning coworkers operating at-risk, it’s important to praise employees who regularly do their jobs safely. This builds a more open, positive safety culture and increases the likelihood these work practices will be performed safely in the future. However, most employees say they almost never receive one-on-one praise or appreciation for their safety-related behaviors. Employees at all organizational levels are well served to provide frequent, genuine praise for safe work practices (Williams, 2003, 2002). Before addressing more communication guidelines, it’s useful to consider various communication styles.

**Communication Styles**

A complicating factor with safety communication is that people have different styles of communication. Brounstein (2001) defines four basic communication patterns: the Dominant, Passive, Passive-Aggressive, and Empathic styles. The first three styles are generally maladaptive and stifle the cultivation of a Total Safety Culture. The fourth style, the Empathic pattern, is ideal and most conducive to effective communication and culture improvement.

**The Dominant Communicator**

Dominant communicators tend to “run people over” in interpersonal conversations. Dominant communicators often believe they’re never wrong, their opinions are more important than those of others; and people who disagree with them are either disloyal or misinformed.

These misguided beliefs often lead to the following maladaptive behaviors:
- Publicly criticize others
- Blame others when problems arise
- Act bossy and negative
- Use of verbally aggressive and threatening language
- Lack of appreciation for the accomplishments of others
- Interrupt others, often finishing their sentences
- Dismiss new ideas without listening to the rationale

Dominant communicators have the following effects on others:
- Provokes fear, countercontrol and alienation
- Fosters resistance, defiance, sabotaging, striking back, alliances formation, lying and covering-up behaviors
- Damages corporate culture and morale
- Hinders optimal organizational performance

**The Passive Communicator**

Passive communicators tend to turn people off by being indirect and meek in their interpersonal communication. Passive communicators often believe you shouldn’t express your true feelings, make waves, or disagree with others. They often think other people’s opinions are more important than their own.

These beliefs often lead to these maladaptive behaviors:
• Remain quiet, even when being treated unfairly
• Ask for permission unnecessarily
• Frequently complain rather than act
• Delegate personal choice to others
• Retreat from interpersonal conflict
• Agree rather than question direction
• Accept directions without questions

Passive communicators have the following effects on others:
• Frustration and mistrust because of not knowing where they stand.
• Presume they lack the courage to be a leader.
• Open communication is hindered.

The Passive-Aggressive Communicator
Passive-Aggressive communicators tend to believe you should “go behind people’s backs” instead of dealing with people directly. These unhealthy beliefs often lead to these undesirable behaviors:
• Appearing to agree with others when they really don’t.
• Making sarcastic remarks and taking subtle digs at others.
• Sending critical messages via email and copying others.
• Holding grudges and valuing “getting even.”
• Sabotaging people behind their backs (i.e., spreading negative gossip).
• Refusing to help others.
• Giving others “the silent treatment.”

Passive-Aggressive communicators have the following effects on others:
• Increased factions and favoritism
• Increased negative gossip or “back stabbing”
• Low interpersonal trust
• Diminished job performance
• Increased uncertainty and job dissatisfaction
• Increased turnover

The Empathic Communicator
Unlike the previous three styles, the Empathic communicator interacts effectively with others to maintain healthy long-term relationships (Williams, 2006). Companies with numerous Empathic communicators are likely to have more healthy organizational cultures. Empathic communicators generally believe:
• Personal opinions and the opinions of others are important.
• The process of coming to a decision (not just the outcome) is important.
• Getting input from others boosts morale and generally leads to better decision making.
These beliefs often lead to these desirable behaviors:

- Communicating expectations instead of demands.
- Focusing on proactive and action-oriented conversation.
- Stating realistic expectations.
- Communicating in a direct and honest manner.
- Working to achieve goals without compromising others.

Empathic communicators have the following effects on others:

- Increase perception of autonomy or personal control.
- Increased self-motivation to achieve and “go beyond the call of duty” for the organization.
- Improved sense of appreciation and respect.
- Increased levels of interpersonal trust, respect, honesty, and openness.

Can you name the communication style of the following people?

![Bobby Knight](image1)
![Woody Allen](image2)
![Oprah](image3)

Most people believe Bobby Knight shows the Dominant Style, Woody Allen reflects the Passive Style, and Oprah practices the Empathic Style.

Leading-edge organizations provide communication skills training to develop Empathic communicators. Here are some fundamental communication guidelines to becoming a more empathic communicator:

**Ten Key Guidelines to Becoming an Empathic Communicator**

1. Be assertive, confident, and action oriented.
2. Express opinions directly and honestly.
3. Show respect for others’ opinions.
   a. Listen carefully and thank others for their input.
   b. Solicit opinions and ideas from others when making decisions.
   c. Avoid ignoring or verbally attacking others with a different opinion.
   d. Offer choices rather than mandates.
4. Invite others to join conversations, especially in meetings.
   a. Reach out to people being excluded from conversation.
b. When an idea is dropped without acknowledgement, bring the idea up again to discuss and reach closure.

5. Confront problems as soon as they occur.
   a. Address the person directly, not through others.
   b. Don’t let negative feelings build up.
   c. Don’t spread or listen to negative gossip

   a. Sincere disclosures about one’s self engenders trust and liking.
   b. Ensure self-disclosures are appropriate and professional.

7. Ask others about themselves and how they are doing.
   a. Spend more time getting to know others.
   b. Caring about others increases trust, liking, respect and morale.
   c. Use appropriate, tasteful humor.

8. Use stories when appropriate to convey positions or establish rapport.
9. Spread positive gossip.
10. Request feedback after sharing ideas and opinions.

Improving Listening Skills
Of course, Empathic communicators are also good listeners. They listen for both emotion and content to understand what the other person is saying. They also reflect back what the speaker is saying to show understanding (“So what you’re saying is…”). In addition, Empathic communicators use non-judgmental tones with others and avoid being too quick to offer advice or dismiss ideas (Williams, 2006). When receiving safety feedback, effective listeners:

- Thank the person for providing feedback, regardless of how well it is given.
- Let others know if the feedback they receive is rude or abrasive.
- Don't be defensive about advice to improve.
- Collaborate with others on developing potential solutions.
- Reach consensus on actions to take.

Dealing with Difficult People
In dealing with rude and difficult people, Empathic communicators don’t take it personally, lose their cool, or lose sleep over the conflict. After all the rude person isn’t losing sleep. They’re also able to effectively exchange information without emotion and tell difficult persons they understand their position but don’t appreciate how they delivered the message.

Effective Email Communication
Increasingly, organizational communication is done via email. While email is efficient, it can also be problematic. Here are some guidelines for effective email communication:

- Keep the language constructive and focused on problem solving.
- Use verbal feedback, not email, for sensitive issues and/or performance feedback.
- Be as concise and direct as possible.
- Watch for spelling errors which might detract from the message being sent.
• Avoid bombarding people with an excessive number of long emails at one time (especially in companies with slow servers).
• Respond to emails as quickly as possible.
• Be sure emails are being sent to the right people.
• Don't use CAPITAL letters or colors which may be interpreted as yelling.

Effective Telephone Communication
Communicating via the telephone is also extremely important. However, it can be difficult to communicate well over the phone because body language and non-verbal cues are unavailable. Here are some guidelines for effective telephone communication:
• Answer the phone with a warm, professional greeting.
• Be patient and don’t interrupt.
• Paraphrase long comments to ensure both parties are on the same page.
• During conference calls, address your comments to all parties.
• Use people’s names during conference calls to engage them in the discussion.
• When leaving voice mail, be direct and succinct, and speak slowly. Leave your name, reason for the call, and contact information.
• Reply to voice mail as soon as possible.

In Conclusion
Effective communication is an integral part of achieving an injury-free workplace. Most injuries are due, in part, to risky behaviors. And yet, employees are often reluctant to provide safety-related feedback to coworkers. This article addressed ways to provide and receive safety feedback more effectively, including corrective feedback (for at-risk behavior) and praise. Also, the maladaptive nature of the Dominant, Passive, and Passive-Aggressive communication styles was detailed. In contrast, guidelines for becoming an Empathic communicator were offered. This included information for improving one-on-one conversations (including dealing with difficult people) and email/telephone communication. It is hoped this article will help improve your safety culture (and performance) by providing sound guidelines to improve safety-related communication.

References