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Thought Leadership:
Terminology and Communication

Lost in translation: How communication impacts safety

'Say what you mean, mean what you say.' It's a common refrain, and seldom is the effect more powerful than in safety. Communicating safety expectations so they are clearly understood – or not – can have major impacts for individuals and organisations. This Thought Piece looks at how the biggest problem in health and safety communication is the illusion that communication has occurred at all. The language we choose and the way we communicate it makes all the difference when it comes to safety performance.

Context and abstract concepts

'Did you get out of the wrong side of the bed today?' If you are familiar with that phrase, you'll understand it's referring to your mood. If you're unfamiliar, the intended meaning is lost and you are going to be more than a little confused. Even a smart person is likely to end up with 'the wrong end of the stick' – and now we have introduced another phrase that means something different to what was literally said. The word 'bed' itself has more than 20 meanings, as does an activity we all do every day, many of us professionally: drive.

These examples demonstrate two things that influence how humans communicate. The first is that context is everything. The meaning of our words changes depending on the context and, if we don't explain our context properly, the meaning will be lost. The second is that we all have a habit of using abstract concepts to convey what we mean and we assume that everyone already understands them.

"People forget that words are contextual and don't have universal meanings. That's why if you look up any word in the dictionary, you'll see a list of definitions," explains business linguistics expert Brett Rutledge.

"As a consequence, what happens in health and safety is that rather than explain what we mean, we tend to just use labels and assume everyone knows what we mean. That doesn't work. A word like 'safe' means different things in different environments: 'safe' in a production environment is very different to 'safe' in an office.

"People need to take the time to actually define what 'safe' really means. You don't want to leave that definition up to someone else. That is what an abstract concept is – it's a common everyday word where we assume everyone has the same kind of vague definition that we do. If you stop and think about it, you'll be amazed how many common words you don't really understand. You have to focus on meaning, and health and safety typically doesn't do that."

Pass the remote – channels of communication

Brett, a World Champion of Public Speaking, explains there are three channels of communication: factual, emotional and symbolic.

The factual, as the name implies, deals with facts and data. "In the factual channel, we tend to concentrate on telling you what things are, when what we should be concentrating on is what things mean. We should be using our expertise to interpret the facts and putting things into a context that people can understand.

"The emotional channel is feelings. Feelings are an integral part of who we are as human beings. The idea that we should strip emotion out of our messaging is a really silly one. You have to convey emotion if you want to connect with people. For example, if you want a room full of people to take something seriously, you need to be serious. If you want people to be happy, you need to be happy. The emotional channel is about giving people a reason to care.

"The last channel is the symbolic, which is everything else: the way you dress, colours, logos, storytelling. The symbolic channel is how we access emotions and facts. It's our way of remembering. It's also the most immediate measure of intent. When things you say aren't backed up in the symbolic channel, people question everything you say.

"The three channels should be working in unison. When we communicate health and safety, our job is to tell people what health and safety means, give them a reason to care and, finally, a way to remember that demonstrates how serious we are – factual, emotional and symbolic. When we don't do that, health and safety suffers."

Are you serious (about safety)?

That's why, as Brett explains, if safety messages contradict across communication channels – such as having performance targets in place that make health and safety KPIs impossible to meet – or safety messages are not backed up across those same channels, people will question your commitment to safety.

Having a health and safety policy and displaying safety posters, for example, become more effective if safety is also discussed in toolbox meetings and included in employee KPIs. Including safety information about safe driving and vehicles, which accounts for two-thirds of worker fatalities, on workplace notice boards reinforces a strong safety culture.

For companies with employees with English as a second language, having health and safety messages translated into an employee's first language obviously makes communicating safety messages more effective but also shows the company takes employee wellbeing seriously.

"One of the mistakes made in health and safety is it's viewed as a kind of standalone mission. Typically a company sets a health and safety target or initiative and then they produce and distribute lots of pretty brochures and that's it," Brett said.

"But safety language should be everywhere, it should be unavoidable. If you want people to change the way they think, then change the language they use. Surround them with the stories and language that communicate safety. If it's that important, talk about it everywhere, not just in a health and safety context.

"And don't just talk – do. For example, if it's health and safety for fleet or truck drivers, take the time to get in the cab with them from Melbourne to Brisbane and find out what really happens. How can you understand what they face unless you've done that, or at least talk to them in depth about it if nothing else?

"Safety language has to reflect what they really have to deal with. If you're just ticking boxes, your language will betray you. It will be blindingly obvious how things really work to the people who are there and they'll behave accordingly."

Don't let me be misunderstood

There are four factors to effective communication. "The first one is that people understand, the second one is they have to agree, the third is they have to care, and the fourth is they have to do something as a result," Brett explains.

"The problem in most environments, and health and safety is no different, is how do we judge whether the communication has been effective, and the typical answer is they did what we wanted them to do. The problem with that is the time lag. So in a health and safety environment typically whether they've done what we wanted them to do comes down to 'did we have any incidents?' and we're measuring that once a month – that's too long because the whole point is not to have incidents in the first place.

"So we have to go and ask our people questions, but the mistake we make is we ask closed questions like 'do you understand?', 'do you agree?', 'does that make sense to you?' If you're the boss asking me any of those, I'm going to say 'yes boss I'm with you 100%'.

"You have to explain what's important and then ask 'what would you do in this scenario?' As much as

possible, let them figure out what the appropriate action is rather than just telling them. That's the only way you can check whether they understand, agree or care.

"If they come up with a similar course of action to what you had in your head then chances are they understand, agree and care. We need to teach people how to make good health and safety decisions, instead of proscribing unrealistic health and safety policies."

Brett says safety has to be part of the day-to-day conversation. If drivers aren't talking about safety amongst themselves and the ideas are coming top down, that means you're constantly telling people what to do instead of them being involved and coming up with ideas themselves.

"So it literally has to become part of the conversation, the language has to be embedded everywhere. If all you've got is a health and safety policy and a poster on a wall, then you're not serious and people will treat it that way."

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