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DIVERSITY IN TODAY'S WORKFORCE - A Challenge for Supervisors -

By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control



Does this sound familiar? You discuss the company safety rules during orientation. You reinforce them during crew meetings. You observe operations and correct those that aren't safe, but some employees forget what you tell them anyway. Why can't they *remember* for cryin' out loud? How can you keep your crew members safe from injury if they don't seem to *listen* to you?

Of course there are people who don't like being told what to do, and continually "test" the system. But consider the following reasons listed in an issue of *Professional Safety* magazine:

Why Employees Don't Do What They're Supposed To Do...

1. They don't *know* what they're supposed to do.
2. They don't know *how* to do it.
3. They don't know *why* they should do it.
4. They *think* they are doing it.
5. They think your way won't *work*.
6. They think their way is *better*.
7. They think something else is *more important*.
8. There are no *positive* consequences for them to do it.
9. There are no *negative* consequences for *not* doing it.
10. They're punished for doing what they're *supposed* to do.
11. There are *obstacles* beyond their control.
12. Their personal *limitations* prevent them from performing

One Important Explanation Is Missing

Perhaps whoever gave them instructions wasn't "speaking their language." Consider this question: Who is responsible for being sure a message is understood—the person *receiving* the message or the person *sending* it? We tend to think it's the responsibility of others to listen...pay attention... remember the instructions we give them. But communication experts don't agree with this. They argue that if you want someone to understand you, it is *your* responsibility to explain things in a way that makes sense to them. This is particularly important when communicating with others who do not share your educational background, native language, age group or gender.

Diversity is Good For Business

Our workplaces are changing and diversity is no longer the exception, it is the norm. But diversity is not just a matter of different ethnic backgrounds. It also involves differences in gender, physical and mental ability, lifestyle preference, religious and cultural beliefs.

We are all created *equal*, but we are not all the *same*—nor should we strive to be. It would be a pretty dull world if there were only one kind of flower, one species of animal, or one choice of vegetable. It would be a pretty boring workforce if we were all clones of each other.

Both productivity and morale improves if we recognize the diversity in today's workforce, and capitalize on the creative input it provides.

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Diversity Can Be A Safety Challenge

Unless everyone you supervise has the same background and experience, communication can be a significant challenge. The new person *seems* to listen when you explain everything that first day or so, but does he or she understand and remember it all? The whole crew may sit through a safety meeting, but do they all hear the same message? Often they do not. When communication barriers exist, supervisors must try to overcome them. Employees who do not understand the jobsite hazards or the reasons for safety rules can be walking time bombs. One unsafe worker can put everyone at risk. What are some of these communication barriers that prevent understanding?

• **BARRIER: Different Educational Levels**

There are some very bright people in the workforce who have not learned to read and write English. They often devise ways to hide this from the company and co-workers. Good workers can be illiterate in either English or their own native language. Consider these statistics: Research tells us that 1 out of 8 adults read no better than the 4th grade level. Only 1 out of 5 adults read above the 5th grade level. Some are illiterate (unable to read or write at all). Some are *functionally* illiterate (read at a 4th grade level or below), and some are *marginally* illiterate (read between a 5th and 8th grade level). Yet, we often conduct safety training at the 9th to 12th grade level, and count on employees' ability to read.

Given these facts, trainers who rely on printed information to promote safe behavior may be naïve. Health and safety warnings to employees who work with hazardous substances are usually described on Material Safety Data Sheets. Yet, how many workers can read and understand a typical MSDS—some of which may confuse even a college graduate?

Safety and health laws require that bulletin boards with safety posters be placed in convenient workplace locations. This may satisfy an OSHA inspector, but means nothing to employees who can't read them. It's a good idea to give employees a list of safety rules when they are hired, but if the list isn't read and understood, it has no value. Other methods of communicating safety messages may be necessary when illiteracy exists or is suspected.

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- **BARRIER: A Different Native Language**

Some of the employees you supervise may speak English poorly—or not at all. And some do okay with basic conversation, but haven't enough vocabulary to follow complex directions or fast-talking. Ideally, supervisors of non-English speaking workers should be bilingual. When this isn't the case, bilingual co-workers can be assigned to help others understand safety or production messages.

The caution is, supervisors must never assume that the translator or interpreter is conveying *all* the important information. When language barriers exist, extra preparation for safety meetings is advisable:

- Before the meeting, talk to interpreters to learn how familiar they are with the subject at hand.
- Check to be sure a *direct* translation exists for all *technical* terms or concepts.
- Point out the need for complete translations, in case the interpreter is tempted to shorten the information.
- Since individuals who speak a language poorly may fear looking foolish if they ask questions, don't be afraid to communicate with specific people at meetings—asking questions through the interpreter.
- Ask interpreters to follow up with coworkers after the meeting or training session, to confirm the employee's understanding.

During and between meetings, speak *slowly*, since learning a new language is no easy matter. This lessens the chance for misunderstanding and helps the other person learn the language as well. Also, it's okay—even advisable—to repeat yourself in order to emphasize a critical issue. If possible, have materials such as safety rules or posters printed in a second language for those who need it. A message written on a piece of colored construction paper with a felt tip pen often attracts more attention than a fancy printed poster—as long as it is in a language the reader understands.

The whole crew may sit through a safety meeting, but do they all hear the same message?

For additional help or ideas, contact your local school district or community college. Bilingual teachers may be able to create bulletin board signs in languages your employees speak. Some districts offer language or writing classes after work or at the job site. Encourage workers to attend, if it will help them—not because it will help you.

- **BARRIER: Attention Problems**

Anyone can become bored and distracted during a meeting or lecture that doesn't interest them, but for some people, concentration is a more complex matter. During the last few years, it has been recognized that many individuals have a newly discovered condition called Attention Deficit Disorder (A.D.D.). These are people who can be very intelligent, capable and talented but may also have a shorter attention span. Symptoms can range from mild to pronounced for those with this condition. They are sometimes hyperactive, with high energy, but tend to have a different learning style than others. If this sounds like a valuable employee you work with, do a little research on the condition.

The good news is, the most effective ways to teach about safety issues and give directions to a person with A.D.D. traits, are the same principals to follow when teaching or training anyone:

- Always emphasize *why* the point is important—make a connection between effort and final results.
- Give practical *examples* of the principals in operation—talk about the purpose and advantages of the object or task.
- Get the individual personally involved in a conversation about the point—probe for feedback.
- Like most people, those with A.D.D. traits tend to “learn by doing,” so ask workers to *demonstrate* what you just told them.

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This interesting condition is far too complex to discuss in this article, but you may want to learn more. If you suspect someone in your work group shows A.D.D. traits, the Internet offers many websites and research articles to help people recognize, understand and deal with this condition.

A Need for Signs and Symbols

When those you supervise have poor reading or language skills, alternatives to written or spoken messages are needed. Symbols and pictures are universal—everyone recognizes a “no smoking” sign. Use safety signs, symbols and graphics around the workplace that communicate with employees who speak various languages. If pictures of eyewear, dust masks, hearing protection, correct lifting procedures, etc., are posted in the right places, simply *pointing* to them can get your message across with very few words—and who can argue with your pointed finger?



Women in the Workforce

Another indication of the changing workforce is the growing presence of women in traditionally male-dominated industries. In most heavy industries, 97 percent of the workers are men. Experts predict, however, that the balance will soon be more equal. In the meantime, this kind of diversity is not always welcomed by men on the crew. It can result in hostility or sexual harassment between crew members. A survey of skilled tradeswomen, for example, found that 83% of these women had been the subject of unwanted sexual remarks.

Needless to say, in high risk work environments, these conditions are stressful, distracting, and potentially dangerous. For both human rights and safety reasons, all firms should develop and enforce a sexual harassment policy that has been effectively communicated to everyone.

The good news is, while sexual harassment may undermine a safe work environment, research shows that a strong safety program can counteract this effect. With top management commitment and employee training, attitudes and behavior can change. Diversity training is seen as the most pro-active step a company can take, and is found to be more effective than sexual harassment training. Diversity training teaches that everyone is treated the same—whatever the gender or ethnic group—and that the main concern is the performance of the employees.



Not Everyone Knows the Jobsite “Lingo”

Every language, every industry, every culture has a lingo to it. Each industry has its own technical terms—as in construction, maritime operations, oil & gas, logging or data processing. Your new employees, whatever their age, nationality or gender, may not know this lingo. If they’re from another culture, they may have a different name for things. Equipment, tools and processes that are familiar to the rest of the crew may be new to them. It doesn’t mean they aren’t smart or capable, they just haven’t learned all the technical words that you take for granted—and they often won’t ask, for fear of appearing stupid.

You can break down communication barriers by teaming up new workers with experienced workers, who have been assigned to help them learn the lingo as well as the work tasks. Apprenticeship is an old and proven process. Your team will work together more comfortably and efficiently once they’ve all learned to “speak the same language.”

Review these ideas and the following checklist with your foremen and lead workers.

A “safety culture” is created by good communication and good leadership. You can provide it!

COMMUNICATION BASICS FOR A DIVERSE WORKFORCE

- A Checklist -

Ask yourself the following questions when language or cultural barriers exist within your workforce. Consider these points when planning safety meetings or developing hiring policies, and during day-to-day communications. It is *your* responsibility to see that your message is understood.

1. Do you speak *slowly* and *clearly* when speaking with someone whose native language is different than yours? When in doubt if you've been understood, don't hesitate to repeat yourself for clarity.
2. Do you understand *why* a person may not ask questions if they don't understand? How can you encourage them to do so?
3. Do your employees understand *why* your training message will be useful to them? Do you incorporate "accident facts" and case histories about injuries into your sessions to make the message relevant?
4. Are employees able to practice and apply new knowledge and skills right away, preferably on the job?
5. Do you ask for feedback and demonstrations after a training session?
6. Do you provide immediate feedback to them, about whether the skills they are practicing are done correctly? If they aren't doing it right, do you re-explain, rather than criticize?
7. Does training incorporate a variety of training materials and methods, such as written and audiovisual instruction, lectures and hands-on coaching? (Don't just give them a video to watch)
8. Are simple words used when explaining things? Safety regulations have a lot of technical jargon that should be translated before you try to explain it to someone else.
9. Do you use safety signs, symbols and graphics around the workplace that communicate with employees who speak a different language? When posted in the right places, *pointing* to these can get your message across with very few words. Remember, "a picture is worth a thousand words."
10. Do you avoid giving written tests for workers who lack strong reading and writing skills? Remember, research says that one out of eight adults read no better than a 4th grade level.
11. If yours is a traditional industry, does gender diversity stand as a barrier? Hostility toward female crew members in high risk work environments can be stressful, distracting, and potentially dangerous. For both human rights and safety reasons, all firms should develop and enforce a sexual harassment policy that has been communicated to all.
12. Do you utilize other multi-lingual crew members during safety training or when assigning work tasks, to serve as interpreters? The caution is, do not *assume* that all the important information is being translated. Provide instruction to the interpreters as well:
 - Beforehand, talk to interpreters to learn how familiar they are with the subject at hand.
 - Check to be sure a direct translation exists for all technical terms or concepts.
 - Point out the need for complete translations, in case the interpreter is tempted to shorten the information.
 - Ask interpreters to follow up with coworkers after the session, to confirm their understanding.

Good two-way communication is an important goal for all personnel. It helps ensure fewer accidents, safe working conditions and workforce morale. Diversity in the workforce is here to stay. Success as an employer depends upon effective communication with all types of people in your workforce.

Selected Resources For Latino/Hispanic Education and Training for Construction and Other Industries

Internet Resources:

<http://www.elcosh.org>

The Electronic Library of Construction Occupational Safety and Health was developed by the *Center to Protect Workers' Rights* with funding by *NIOSH*. It allows you to search by hazard, trade, job site, training and provides Español and other Non-English Materials. Extensive links to other resource organizations are also provided.

<http://www.cpwr.com>

The Center to Protect Workers' Rights is the research and development institute of the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO. The Center produced the above resources and provides a variety of valuable information and resources for the construction industry.

Written Materials:

"Construction Spanish, the Instant Jobsite Translator" Shirt pocket size book translates over 1,400 words and terms. Can be customized with your company's name and logo. Volume discount schedule. Under 100, \$5.00 each.

www.constructionspanish.com (970) 568-3184

This site also offers Spanish/English books in Truckers Spanish, Construction Communication and Operating Techniques for the Tractor, Loader, Backhoe in English and Spanish.