

BETTER SAFETY CONVERSATIONS

Every day, safety conversations take place between executives and managers, between safety professionals and workers, and—most importantly—between front-line supervisors and the workers who report to them. These conversations have great potential for improving workplace safety and health.

The core elements of an effective safety and health program—management leadership, worker participation, and a proactive approach to finding and fixing hazards—depend on good communication skills, real listening, clear speech, and well-run meetings.

This is where effective safety conversations come in—and where your role as a supervisor is key. The example you set, and the way you talk to workers about safety, has a huge impact on the company's safety and health program, safety culture, and ability to reduce injury and illness.

In this document, you will learn:

- The basics of good safety conversations.
- Tips for holding different types of safety conversations and making them more effective.
- Ways to overcome common reasons people avoid safety conversations.
- The power of stories to enhance your safety conversations.
- The importance of leading by example—“walking the walk” when it comes to workplace safety and health.

Safety Conversations: The Basics

Many books and training programs are available to help people improve vital conversation skills. Following are just a few:

- *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*¹
- *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*²
- *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time*³
- *Silent Danger: The Five Crucial Conversations that Drive Workplace Safety*⁴

A “crucial conversation,” from the book of the same name, is defined as a conversation where opinions vary,

the stakes are high, and emotions run strong. These qualities describe many safety conversations:

- The stakes are high. People could be injured, have their lives altered, or even die.
- People have strong views about whether or not a hazard exists, and whether it needs to be addressed. Even if they agree to address the issue, they may disagree about what needs to be done. Something as basic as the selection of safety glasses can become contentious.
- Emotions can run high. People care deeply about their well-being, and their emotions naturally come into play. You want people to care about safety and you do not want their emotions to become so strong that it slows progress.

To make these conversations successful, you need to make sure workers feel safe expressing their views and know that you care about their welfare. If workers feel threatened, they are unlikely to fully participate in the discussion, learning will be stifled, and change is less likely. Remind workers they will not get in trouble for talking to you, and that your policy allows them to raise safety and health concerns without fear of reprisal; where applicable, suggest they can have a labor representative present. When conversations heat up, try to be calm, rational, and open-minded. Avoid insults, personal attacks, direct criticism, and threatening gestures. State your intentions clearly: that you are trying to help them avoid injury and illness, and

the devastating consequences of an injury to them, their co-workers, their future, and their family. Repeat as often as needed.

Ways to Begin a Safety Conversation

“I’d like to talk to you about something important. Let’s review the safest way to do this task, so you and your team are not at risk of getting hurt.”

“I respect your experience and want to make sure nobody is injured, so I’d like to work with you to address this issue.”

“Can we talk about what I’m seeing and figure out a better way to do it?”

Tips for Different Types of Safety Conversations

Expect to have several informal types of safety conversations as you work to engage the workforce and implement your safety and health program. These include the walk-around conversation, the “elevator speech,” and the feedback safety conversation. Formal conversations will also occur in scheduled meetings on the topic, but be prepared to discuss safety topics during the following informal conversations.

Type 1: The Walk-Around Conversation

This conversation occurs when an executive, mid-level manager, or safety professional is walking through the facility or jobsite with workers. It could be a regular safety inspection, an executive walk-around to display safety management leadership, or a non-safety walk-around where safety issues arise. The key to successful conversations in this setting is establishing two-way dialogue, and, above all, good listening. Ask the workers an open-ended question, and then really listen to what they tell you.

Your questions could be:

- “What is your biggest safety concern with this task?”
- “What can we do to make this task safer?”
- “If you could address one safety concern—say, by buying equipment, changing a work process, or changing a work rule—what would it be?”

Then ask clarifying questions and engage the worker.

- “Do you have any ideas that would help us do it better?”
- “Have you seen an incident caused by the issue?”
- “Has anybody been hurt, or narrowly avoided getting hurt?”
- “Would you be willing to help by being on a task force to look at the issue?”

Active Listening

Use active listening techniques to help you understand the person’s message and build empathy:

- Mirror or repeat what the person is telling you
- Paraphrase the message
- Summarize content
- Ask for clarification
- Acknowledge feelings
- Avoid reacting with criticism

Address workers' actions that are unsafe without criticizing the workers, but also praise what they are doing right and ask questions about what they might do differently to ensure safety. Make sure you capture these items with notes. Look for actionable items and follow up, either yourself or by assigning the issue to a safety committee or responsible manager. If you decide that further action is not needed, tell the employee why you have made that decision. If you have these conversations, listen well, and follow up with real action, you can make it clear to workers that you are serious about safety.

Type 2: The "Why I Care about Safety" Elevator Speech

This conversation usually happens when somebody asks you why you care about safety, and you should offer your perspective whenever the opportunity arises. It is important that you have an immediate, concise answer. Just as an elevator ride will last only a minute or two, this speech should be short and to the point. Explain why you care about safety, share your experience, give some statistics, or tell a personal story. Here is a sample speech.

There are three reasons why I care about safety in our workplace:

- "Last year we had five injuries. Those didn't have to happen. When I see the injury reports, my heart

Type 3: The Safety Feedback Conversation

Giving feedback is one of the most common safety conversations. Constructive feedback is needed to improve safety. Feedback that comes in the form of criticism can make people defensive. Managers often avoid giving feedback in order to avoid confrontations.

In *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen suggest giving just one of three different types of feedback at a time: appreciation, coaching, or constructive feedback.⁵ You will likely be more successful if you give only one type of feedback in a single session; giving different types can confuse the

Focus on the Positive

Try to emphasize the positive aspects of your program. Effective safety and health programs can improve:

- Product, process, and service quality.
- Workplace morale.
- Employee recruiting and retention.
- Image and reputation among customers, suppliers, and the community.

goes out to the workers and their families, and I want to do what I can to see it doesn't happen to somebody else."

- "I looked up the injury statistics and found that thousands of workers are injured in our industry. I think our industry should be a leader in protecting its workers, and I want us to do our part."
- "The importance of safety really hit home for me when one of my uncles was seriously injured on the job. I saw for myself the suffering he went through and the impact it had on our family. I want to make sure it doesn't happen to our workers and their families."

person you are giving feedback to and dilute your message.

Appreciation, or positive feedback, is an important feedback tool. Research indicates that negative feedback is two to four times more powerful than positive feedback (but in a negative way). If you want to promote a positive environment, limit negative feedback and give twice as much positive feedback. Praise with enthusiasm, criticize lightly. When giving appreciation, thank the person for doing something positive for safety. For example:

- “I really appreciate the way you brought up the safety issue without getting people upset.”
- “Thanks for pointing out that safety issue. Your actions could keep somebody from getting hurt.”
- “Thanks for repairing the equipment quickly. It shows all of us that safety is important.”

Coaching is another helpful form of feedback, especially when the person is motivated, cares about safety, and is willing to work on your safety and health program. It is a positive form of feedback that can take two forms: performance coaching and leadership coaching.

- Performance coaching is much like coaching sports skills. You model the activity; observe the person you are coaching; and give feedback on what was right, what was wrong, and what could be improved. Then repeat until the person gets it right.
- Leadership coaching asks open-ended questions and lets workers find their own solutions to problems. Some questions you might ask include:
 - “How do you think we should address this safety issue?”
 - “What kind of hazard controls would help us avoid this problem in the future?”
 - “Personal protective equipment (PPE) is provided to protect you from specific hazards. What else is important to you when selecting PPE?”

When coaching, you may also want to help the person brainstorm alternatives and stay on topic. The more difficult the question, the easier it is to veer off into other subjects. Use questions to ensure safety issues are addressed:

- “How can we improve this task?”
- “Will you work with me to create an action plan to make sure this doesn’t fall through the cracks?”
- “Will you make a commitment to work with me on this issue?”

Constructive feedback should be used when performance is not meeting expectations, and you have specific feedback to correct the situation. The goal is to improve and make a given situation better. To achieve this goal, the feedback session and the feedback giver need to approach it in a positive way that will motivate the feedback receiver. Avoid judgmental statements and personal criticisms. Focus on the behavior, not on the person or his or her values or personality. Remember that the feedback receiver has the option to accept or reject your feedback.

Several methods for providing feedback can help you improve these conversations. One method uses the “COIN” method, described in *The Feedback Imperative*.⁶ Another method that combines some elements of constructive feedback and coaching is the “Ask-Tell-Ask” method. (See box on page 5 for details.)

No matter what feedback type or method you use, you will need to follow up and see if the strategies are working and behaviors have changed. Frequently update workers on the status of their safety suggestions and/or reports of hazards they have submitted. Inform them as soon as their concerns have been addressed, or explain if their suggestions cannot be implemented. A common reason workers do not report safety hazards is because they never get a response.

Two Methods for Constructive Feedback

The COIN Method

Connect: Find common ground with the feedback receiver and the feedback topic.

- “Can we agree that we both care about safety?”
- “Safety matters to me, does it matter to you too?”
- “My family expects me to work safely so I come home in one piece. Do you have a family?”

Observations: Make specific, accurate descriptions of the observed behavior.

- “I see you aren’t wearing your safety glasses.”
- “You were working on a machine without locking it out.”
- “You manually lifted a patient without a patient lift.”

Impact: Describe the consequences of the behavior.

- “You could get something in your eye and need to go to the emergency room.”
- “The machine could have started and you would have been badly injured.”
- “If you keep lifting patients without help, you will injure your back. Many of these injuries result in permanent disability.”

Next steps: Partner with the person to develop an action plan or behavior change to improve workplace safety.

- Let’s make sure your safety glasses fit properly and meet your needs. Come to my office and we can look at different models that protect your eyes.”
- “You are saying you have forgotten the work procedures. Let’s pause on this activity and I’m going to enroll you in a lockout/tagout refresher class to make sure you understand the proper procedures and know what to do in the event an incident occurs.”
- “You couldn’t find the patient lift? Let’s make sure we’re keeping it where you can access it if needed.”

The “Ask, Tell, Ask” Method

First, **ask** the worker to assess their own performance. This begins a conversation, promotes reflection, and helps you assess the person’s self-awareness, level of insight, and stage of learning.

- “How did the safety training go? Do you understand the procedure now?”
- “How did the new safety procedure work? Were you able to follow it?”
- “That was a heated safety committee meeting today. How do you feel you handled the conversation?”

Then, **tell** what you observed. React to the worker’s observation, give them some feedback on their self-assessment, and include both positive and corrective elements.

- “Thank you for your insights. I saw how you were really engaged during the PPE module. It also looked like you had a harder time learning the fire protection material.”
- “You were paying good attention. I saw many of the same things. I observed the team following the first two parts of the procedure. It also looked to me like they didn’t follow the last part properly.”
- “I think the meeting went fairly well, too. The discussion about new high visibility gear went really well. Unfortunately, the discussion about forklift training wasn’t as productive.”

End by **asking** about the worker’s understanding and strategies for improvement. Discuss what the worker could do differently. Give your own suggestions and commit to monitoring improvement together.

- “How can you make sure you understand our fire prevention program?”
- “Do you have any ideas for adjusting the last part of the new procedure?”
- “How could we handle the forklift discussion better when it comes up at next month’s meeting?”

The Conversation That Doesn't Happen

A serious concern is that many safety conversations just don't happen. People remain silent instead of speaking up about a safety concern. The authors of *Crucial Conversations* and their colleagues conducted a survey of 1,500 workers in 22 organizations, which found that 93 percent of employees say their workgroup is currently at risk from a safety issue that is not being discussed.⁷ Almost half knew of an injury that happened because someone didn't speak up. These are incidents waiting to happen. Encouraging people to speak up when they see something going wrong can help avoid incidents, injuries, and fatalities. "If you see something, say something" is a saying we have all learned when travelling, and it also applies to safety.

The Vital Smarts survey found five types of rationalizations, identified below, that people use to avoid safe work practices and that kill the right conversation about safety. Here are a few ideas for dealing with these excuses when you encounter them.

"Get It Done"—unsafe practices that are justified by the need to meet deadlines.

- Explain that deadlines aren't the only thing that matters. It is also important to do quality work, and to do the work safely.
- "If you do not follow the safety procedures, we are more likely to have a serious incident where people are injured and property is destroyed. If that happens, we will have to stop production and not meet the deadline. Doing the job safely can help make sure you make the deadline."
- "In my opinion, no deadline is worth an injury. The cost is just too high."

"We Can't Talk About That"—unsafe practices that stem from skill deficits that can't be discussed.

- Try to address the topic with non-judgmental suggestions.
- "I think we could do this job better and more safely if we all took some refresher training."
- "I don't think he's learned how to do this yet, and may not be the best person for this task. Other people on our team have more experience and knowledge about this and can keep us from getting hurt."

"Just This Once"—unsafe practices that are justified as exceptions to the rule.

- Explain that it only takes one time to get hurt, and that this excuse is too easy to use again and again. Just one time can become the usual way of doing things.

- "Incidents occur very quickly and with no warning. You don't know if the next time is the time you will be unlucky and it will go wrong."
- "If you use the justification that it is just this once, you are more likely to use that reasoning again. It won't be once, and it could become all the time."

"This Is Overboard"—unsafe practices that bypass precautions considered excessive.

- Try to focus on avoiding injury. Explain that the rule was put in place for a reason. "There is a process for changing rules, and that may be a better way to deal with it."
- "I think the rule was put in place because of an incident where workers were injured, some of them seriously. We should just follow the procedure so we don't get hurt too."
- "If you don't think the procedure is necessary, we should try to change it. Until then, we should try to follow it as closely as possible."

"Are You a Team Player?"—unsafe practices that are justified for the good of the team, company, or customer.

- Focus on the wellness of the team, and how unsafe practices can hurt the team.
- "I think of myself as a team player, and I want to make sure the team is kept safe. I don't want to see any of my team members get hurt."
- "I've been working with these people for years, and I know many of their families. I don't want to see an injury affect their future life."

The Power of Stories

Storytelling can be a useful skill in any conversation or speaking opportunity. Telling a short, compelling story describing a real event is a persuasive way to reinforce your safety program. The story should be short, just a few sentences delivered in 15 to 20 seconds.

- “I knew a worker who was injured doing that on the job. After a few surgeries and three months of recovery, he managed to come back to work. Unfortunately, he was never the same. The trauma of the event impacted his confidence and he just couldn’t do things he did before.”
- “Last year we had three workers who injured their backs—one of them so badly that they are permanently disabled and will never be able to work again.”

- “The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that 20 people died in trench collapses last year. I don’t want to see that happen to our workers.”

Collect stories, and know about incidents that have occurred in your workplace, your company, and your industry. Do your research about injuries, illnesses, and fatalities that have occurred to workers in your industry or do the same work that you do. Follow the news so you can use a current event in your area. Stories that are fresh and close to you have more power. Use the webpages for OSHA, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics to collect statistics and stories about workplace incidents. Talk to your insurance carrier, which might have good stories you can use.

Set a Good Example

Leadership by example is the strongest way to encourage workers to engage in your safety and health program, to work safely, and use PPE.⁸ Walk the walk by using the right PPE, following safe work procedures, and promoting the safety and health program; this helps set an example and further your safety goals.

The way you communicate also sets an example. Raising sensitive safety issues with skill, respect, and a caring attitude shows other workers how to do the same. Make sure that you accept constructive feedback well, ask for feedback often, and handle negative feedback with grace.

You can improve your safety and health program by improving your safety conversations. Experiment with different approaches, build a library of safety phrases and stories, and have these conversations without fear. By doing so, you can contribute to preventing injuries.

¹ *Difficult Conversations*, Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, Sheila Heen

² *Crucial Conversations, Skills for Talking When the Stakes Are High*, Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, Al Switzer

³ *Fierce Conversations*, Susan Scott

⁴ *Silent Danger, The Five Crucial Conversations that Drive Workplace Safety*, www.vitalsmarts.com/safety

⁵ *Thanks for the Feedback, the Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen

⁶ *The Feedback Imperative*, Anna Carroll, MSSW

⁷ <https://www.vitalsmarts.com/press/2010/02/silent-danger-93-percent-of-organizations-are-at-risk-of-avoidable-workplace-accidents/>

⁸ The Differential Effects of Transformational Leadership Facets on Employee Safety, *Safety Science*, Volume 62, February 2014, Pages 68–78; Volume 62, February 2014, Pages 68–78.