



How to communicate health & safety in the workplace

Communicating health and safety information in the workplace has become harder than ever before. Email, cell phones, and personal digital assistant devices such as *Blackberries* can add to communication clutter. Critical health and safety messages can get mixed, misunderstood or even missed.

In January 2007, Accenture released a survey of more than 1,000 middle managers in the U.S and the U.K. conducted in June 2006, and found that:

- 59 per cent miss information that might be valuable every day because it exists elsewhere in the company, but just cannot be found.
- 50 per cent found information that was obtained had no value.
- 42 per cent use the wrong information at least once a week.

Think about the implications of this survey for health and safety communication; and remember that any accident has huge potential to damage your most important asset: your reputation. To deliver effective health and safety messages, ensure that health and safety communication an important part of your corporate culture.

Establish a communication culture

Establishing a communication culture means being proactive rather than reactive. It also means two-way communication; giving prominence to health and safety communication throughout an organization; and probing deeper and anticipating issues.

For example, does management regularly review the results of reports from employee assistance programs (EAPs) to preempt any problems that might be looming on the horizon? Does your organization have drug, alcohol, harassment or other issues that management doesn't know about?

One organization I worked with discovered that its employees had an inordinately high incidence of drug- and alcohol-related EAP consultations. This factor influenced another, namely the

"broken telephone" syndrome. Specifically, new safety regulations were issued to, but never reached, the employees who actually had to act on those changes.

After the accident happened, my client took responsibility. During the investigation process, they apprised the organization of news, undertook "next steps," and ran in *memoriam* articles about the two employees who were killed.

Clarity, simplicity, timeliness

Health and safety information must be delivered in a clear, simple and timely way. This means short, simple, hard-hitting sentences that spell out what behaviour employees need to change.

The hardest single concept for organizations to come to terms with is the fact that just because communication — including health and safety — was sent, it does not mean that the information was received, understood, or acted upon.

This, along with poor distribution lists (hardcopy or email) and out-of-date chains of command, are the bane of many organizations.

There is still a lot to be said for bulletin boards, posters, etc. to distribute and reinforce health and safety messages.

I advise my clients to leverage the "supervisor/manager-and-direct-report" relationship to distribute critical health and safety information in regular face-to-face meetings. Even in the "Internet Age", nothing equals eye contact.

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Some key communication indicators for health & safety

1. Is communicating health and safety part of your organization's culture? Conduct a communication audit.
2. Is communication about health and safety communicated to employees in a clear, consistent and timely way? Or, do messages read more like clauses in a legal document?
3. Are health and safety messages written to influence behaviour? What should employees do more of, stop doing, or do differently?
4. Does your organization test to see if critical safety messages were delivered to, and understood by, the employees who need to act on them?
5. Are employees' safety complaints taken seriously, or disregarded?
6. Does management "lead by example?" If steel toe-caps, hardhats and safety goggles are required to walk the production floor, do managers put these on, or do they cut corners?
7. Does your organization have a crisis communication plan? Be ready to answer the question: "When did you first learn about the problem, and what did you do about it?"