Starting a Safety Conversation

Why they’re important and how to have them.
It’s now generally recognised that health and safety management should embrace – in a holistic way – the interactions between the working environment, equipment, systems and procedures, and the people in the organisation.

Effective risk management depends partly on the behaviour of individuals in an organisation.

A significant number of accidents can be traced to unsafe behaviours. Poorly designed equipment or operations, poor systems and poor working conditions can all encourage unsafe behaviours, but these behaviours are not inevitable.

It’s not enough to provide safe equipment, systems and procedures if the culture doesn’t encourage healthy and safe working.

Being able to have meaningful safety conversations assists in creating a culture of safety within the workplace.
Quality safety conversations are one of the most effective tools employers can use to create good communication flow between the workforce and management by creating an environment where everyone values safety.

According to T.R. Krause (2005), there are seven key safety leadership characteristics and associated behaviours that can influence safety culture, of which, three are heavily influenced by having safety conversations. These include:

- **Communication** – The way leaders communicate about safety creates and maintains the safety culture of the organisation.
- **Collaboration** – Leaders who encourage active employee participation in resolving safety issues promote employee ownership of those issues.
- **Feedback and recognition** – Recognition that is soon, certain and positive encourages safe behaviour.
Different Types of Safety Conversations

**Planned Safety Conversations:**
These are often referred to as safety observations or safety interactions, where a person or group of people go out to observe and commence a safety conversation with a workgroup.

**Unplanned Safety Conversations:**
These are spontaneous safety conversations between workers and are usually initiated when an unsafe act is observed.

**Meeting Safety Conversations:**
These are safety conversations where a member of the team will speak about a safety story (good or bad) in order to convey an important safety message. The purpose of these meetings is to encourage conversation and ensure safety is kept front of mind.
Conducting an Effective Safety Conversation

The best people to conduct safety conversations are managers, supervisors and/or recruitment consultants. When conducting a planned safety conversation the following steps can be taken to help ensure it is both positive and effective.

1. Ensure you review or have an understanding of the works being undertaken (i.e. major risks and hazards to be aware of).
2. Let the workgroup know that you are here to have a safety conversation about the work they are doing.
3. Observe what the workgroup are doing.
4. Comment on what the workgroup are doing safely.
5. If there is something unsafe being performed then discuss with the workgroup
   a. The possible consequences of the unsafe act. (I am concerned about all the cords as you may trip over and seriously hurt yourself)
   b. Safer ways to do the job (Key is to allow the workgroup to come up with potential solutions rather than you telling them how to do the job safely.)
6. Get the workgroups agreement to work safely in the future.
7. Discuss other safety issues or concerns the workgroup has.
8. Thank the workgroup for their time.
Starting a Safety Conversation.

Benefits of Safety Conversations

Safety conversations have many benefits to creating a positive safety culture. Some of these include:

- **Preventing injuries and property loss.** The more safety is spoken about on the floor, safe behaviours are reinforced and unsafe behaviours are stopped, the less likely it is that incidents will occur.

- **Reinforcing positive safety behavior.**

- **Raising safety awareness in the workforce.** The more safety conversations that are held throughout the day the greater the safety awareness will be in the workforce.

- **Establishing standards.** Consistent communication of safety expectations assists in establishing standards to create “this is the way things are done around here” environment.

- **Testing understanding of standards.** Safety conversations provide and measure how well standards are understood in the workforce.

- **Testing compliance with standards.** Being out on the floor provides an opportunity to gauge which standards are being followed and which are not.

- **Identifying weaknesses in safety systems.** Two way communication can lead the workforce to identify weaknesses and potential improvements in safety systems that can be fixed and actioned.

- **Identifying and correcting unsafe situations.**

- **Motivating people.** The workforce will generally feel more positive and empowered when it comes to safety and the culture of the organisation. As a result, workers will be more likely to continue positive safety behaviours.
Common Mistakes

Safety conversations can be a very potent tool in creating a positive safety culture, but if done poorly can actually do more harm than good. Some common mistakes that people make when undertaking a safety conversation include:

1. Heading out for a planned safety conversation when you do not have a positive attitude. People can sense authoritarian and negative attitudes.

2. Having a set agenda of what you want or what you are looking for. If you are focused on one particular area then it is likely you may miss important information whilst you are having the conversation.

3. Spying on workers without their knowledge. This shows lack of trust and is a sure fire way to degrade the safety culture within the organization.

4. Bringing out checklists and ticking it off whilst having the conversation.

5. Only focusing on things the workforce were doing incorrectly. It is more important to focus on the safe behaviours and ensure they are congratulated for their efforts.

6. Nitpicking. Try to ensure you focus on the bigger items.

7. Telling people what they are doing or what they can do to improve. The purpose is to promote a conversation and allow the workforce to come up with the ideas on how to improve safety where possible.

8. Asking closed questions.

9. Asking confirmatory or leading questions.

10. Asking questions which try to prove your own hypothesis or assumptions.

11. Raving on with your own war stories. Conversations are not about you. Dialogue needs to be two way.
IPA has over thirty years experience providing employment and career solutions designed to help organisations and individuals to succeed at work.

Keeping people safe at work is our number one priority.

Our approach to safety reduces risk and helps to support an engaged and productive workforce. Our safety commitment extends far beyond our legal obligations and we have invested in world class safety systems to support our safety vision of keeping All Safe, All the Time.

Ask us how we can help you begin safety conversation.

Call us on 1300 658 400 or email safety@ipa.com.au.