Feedback

The Foundation for Exceptional Safety Performance

By Justin R. Ganschow

It was 4:15 p.m. on a Thursday and most employees had already left the hydroelectric dam at the end of day shift. The six men who remained were gathered around an electrical cabinet, troubleshooting one of the dam's generators. The only journeyman, the most senior of the group, was crouched down performing the work, while the others watched over his shoulder. He had not taken the time to put on his fire-retardant clothing, but no one said anything. There was confusion about the energized status of a circuit and whether it was locked out, but no one questioned the experienced man or confirmed with the control room.

When the journeyman closed a breaker, the energized circuit caused an arc blast, severely burning all six men. Five were airlifted to a hospital 150 miles away and one never returned to work. An investigation into the incident determined that it was not faulty equipment that caused the blast, rather a failure due to workplace culture. All the workers knew the proper procedure for testing and getting clearance, but no one spoke up. No one asked questions. Now, all of them will wear permanent scars of that failure to give safety feedback for the rest of their lives.

Giving Feedback

Nearly every organization tells its employees to speak up when they see something unsafe. It is typically part of new employee orientation on day one. However, few organizations train employees on how to have that conversation with a peer or superior when they see an unsafe behavior occur. Even fewer train employees on how to receive safety feedback from others in a constructive manner, and to respond with an attitude of gratitude. When building a safety training program, OSH professionals tend to overlook these "soft" interpersonal skills and focus mostly on compliance. However, these critical components set the tone for overall safety performance.

Everyone prioritizes job responsibilities by interpreting verbal and nonverbal input from a direct supervisor; what the supervisor demonstrates is important usually becomes employees' focus as well. Unfortunately, most organizations do not effectively train supervisors and managers to communicate safety expectations clearly, frequently or in a way that is positively perceived by employees.

This issue is apparent in the global database of the statistically validated Caterpillar (2018) Safety Perception Survey. Of the hundreds of thousands of people who have taken the assessment, 96% of frontline employees agree that their organization actively encourages them to work safely. However, 51% say risks are sometimes overlooked to get the job done and 24% have been asked to do something they felt was unsafe. There is a disconnect between senior leaders' intentions for the organization and the people who work closest to the hazards. If OSH professionals want all employees to work in a manner that reflects safety as a value, just like production and quality, we must set clear expectations, then train them how to perform. When training employees on how to give and receive feedback, start with leaders because they set the example and reinforce expectations.

The first step of developing a safety feedback program is to clearly define what feedback is all about. It is not about rules and regulations, being a compliance officer or reciting corporate safety policies. It is about showing care and respect for the other person because you do not want something bad to happen to him/her or someone nearby. While it seems simple and straightforward, many emotional barriers keep people from speaking up when they see someone doing something unsafe. OSH professionals must help others overcome these common excuses in the moment:

- It's the supervisor's job to do something.
- If it doesn't affect me, I'm not going to get involved.
- They might get upset with me.
- They don't even work for us.
- I'm not sure what the policy is.

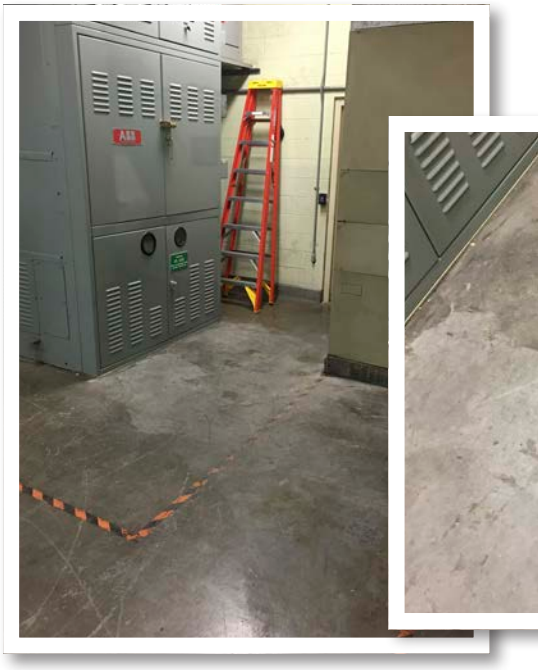
Committing to giving safety feedback requires overcoming these barriers. Failure to speak up can have dire, lifelong consequences. If silence permits an unsafe situation to become an injury or fatality, looking in the mirror every morning becomes a heavy burden to bear. Employees must understand and reflect on that reality more so than rules and regulations.

Giving Feedback

Train employees on three simple steps to giving safety feedback (see "Giving and Receiving Feedback" sidebar).

1) Ask the coworker why s/he is doing the job that way and explain that it is causing concern for his/her safety. Maybe s/he was not trained in the correct process. Perhaps s/he saw the boss doing it this way before. Maybe s/he is taking an alternate route because the prescribed process does not work and this method is just as safe. Or s/he may be taking a shortcut. Asking will help reveal the reason. People are much more likely to respond in a favorable manner if you ask questions rather than jump to conclusions or recite rules.

2) Work with the person to find a safer solution, then ask him/her to commit to doing it that way. By involving the person in developing the solution, the coworker will be more likely to work in that manner. It may feel awkward or confrontational to ask a coworker to change his/her behavior, but verbalizing this agreement reinforces the person's commitment to safety.



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3) The final, critical step is to follow up with the coworker to ensure that the behavior s/he has agreed to is actually being performed. Since the person committed in Step 2, this will likely be an opportunity for giving positive recognition. Recognition reinforces that you are paying attention and care, and that the commitment s/he made is important to you. If s/he has not changed the behavior, remind the individual of the commitment s/he made and ask why s/he has not changed the behavior (Step 1). Explain that you must escalate the situation if s/he continues to work unsafely.

Receiving Feedback

Giving feedback is only half of the equation. OSH professionals must also train employees to be open to receiving safety feedback from others. This begins with understanding what receiving feedback means, regardless of the manner in which the feedback is delivered. If someone gives us safety feedback, it means that we are acting in a way that is causing concern for our or others' safety. Additionally, it means that the giver of feedback overcame any personal barriers to deliver that message and we owe the person the respect to stop our activity and listen. Receiving feedback consists of two steps: listen and commit (see "Giving and Receiving Feedback" sidebar).

1) Listen to what the person says. Safety feedback can sound and feel like criticism, but it is really about caring. Even if the feedback giver does not deliver it in a constructive, tactful manner, try to get to the heart of the message and determine exactly what activity is causing concern.

2) Commit to a safer solution that you and the deliverer of the feedback agree on. Avoid being passive or aggressive in your response. Be assertive by asking questions to understand the issue and how it could be remedied. Then follow up your commitment by changing your behavior. Respond to the feedback with gratitude that the person cared enough to speak up.

Conclusion

Giving and receiving safety feedback is simple in principle, but challenging in process. It requires training, practice and reinforcement. The author had the privilege of meeting with the injured workers and those who rescued them at the hydroelectric power generation company a year after the incident. Some of them had returned to work just a few weeks prior. They were there to evaluate adding the Caterpillar "Speak Up! Listen Up!" training to their safety culture transformation journey and there was a palpable tension in the room. As the workers went through self-assessments and video scenarios, they began to open up about what kept them from speaking up in the critical moment.

The tipping point came when the journeyman who had closed the breaker causing the explosion raised his hand and said, choking back emotions, "Everyone in this company needs to go through this training." There was not a dry eye in the room. Healing began that day between those scarred men with the simple understanding that safety feedback is not about compliance; it is about caring.

While their footprints seared into the concrete serve as a reminder to all who pass through that corridor, all members of the organization now have the skills and support to give and receive feedback well.

Giving & Receiving Feedback

Giving Feedback

1) Ask
- Find out why they are doing what they are doing.
- Ask to share your concerns.

2) Commit
- Work together to find a safer way.
- Ask the person to make a commitment to work safely.

3) Follow up
- Check to make sure the person is working safely.
- If not, do not give up.
- Give positive feedback; tell the person when s/he is doing it right.

Receiving Feedback

1) Listen
- Focus on the message.
- Get to the facts.
- Ask questions if needed.

2) Commit
- Agree on a safer way.
- Make the commitment.
- Follow it up.

The footprints of the injured workers seared into the concrete serve as a reminder to all who pass through that corridor the importance of giving and receiving safety feedback.

References

Caterpillar. (2018). Safety perception survey. Retrieved from www.cat.com/en_US/support/safetyservices/services/assessments/perception.html

Justin R. Ganschow, CSP, CHMM, has 15 years' experience in the environment, health and safety field working in environmental education, public health and private industry. With Caterpillar Safety Services, he has led safety culture and leadership improvement initiatives in manufacturing facilities and as a consultant to the construction, logging, manufacturing, mining, aggregates, waste/recycling and utilities industries. Ganschow is passionate about empowering frontline employees, engaging supervisors in positive accountability practices and supporting leaders in their efforts to shape safety culture. He has presented at many industry conferences across the U.S., and is a frequent contributor to professional journals and trade publications. Ganschow holds a B.S. in Environmental Science—Biology and an M.S. in Biology from Bradley University. Ganschow is a professional member of ASSE's Central Illinois Chapter.