



Maren Gamble:

Every day on jobsites across the province of Ontario, supervisors gather their crews and run through a safety talk. It's one of the most consistent safety practices in the industry. It's also, in many cases, one of the biggest missed opportunities to actually prevent an injury. That's not a knock on supervisors. It's a design problem, and it's one we can fix.

Announcer:

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Maren Gamble:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm your host, Maren Gamble. Today, I have two guests that I have the pleasure of working with directly at IHSA. Mike Estalilla and Karolina Chelminiak are two members of our team of program developers and instructional designers at IHSA. These are two of the people who design and build IHSA's training programs, and today I'm asking them to give you practical advice to maximize the impact of your on-site learning. Welcome, Mike and Karolina.

Michael Estalilla:

Thanks for having us.

Karolina Chelminiak:

Hi, Maren.

Maren Gamble:

So safety talk, toolbox talk, tailboard talk, morning huddle. Whatever you call it on your site, the concept is the same. A few minutes at the start of the shift to talk about what could hurt someone today. For our chat, let's start with the basics. Mike and Karolina, what is a safety talk and what isn't a safety talk? Mike?

Michael Estalilla:

Yeah, thanks for the question, Maren. Just so we're all on the same page, a safety talk, sometimes called a toolbox talk, is a short focused conversation about one specific hazard or task. Safety talks are typically short, practical, interactive, and action focused. On the flip side though, what isn't a safety talk is that it's not a classroom training. It's not a policy dump or reading from a manual. It's definitely not a checkbox exercise as well, and it's not a one-way communication. And no vague reminders. So to really sum it all up, key features of a good safety talk can include having it being specific to the work, short and to the point, focused on real risks, participatory, and action focused. Bad safety talks include reading print materials, not being relevant to the work, no participation, having too much information being shared, and just being done just to meet compliance.

At the end of the day though, a safety talk is about creating awareness right before the risk shows up. When done correctly and continuously, safety talks become part of the health and safety workplace culture of any organization.

Maren Gamble:

Amazing. So with that in mind, I think the first thing that we should talk about is how do I even prepare to give a talk like that? We know that supervisors don't have a lot of time to prepare for their daily talk, but I'm sure there's some important things that they can consider. So what are the things you think everyone should consider if they're planning a safety talk?

Michael Estalilla:

Yeah, great question. I'll start first and Karolina will jump in after. I think for me, top three things to consider when planning a safety talk, like you mentioned, limited amount of time, how can I effectively prepare so that the impact is there? I think first start with the work happening today, like what's happening right now. Safety talks should always connect to the job being done, the environment, and the tools being used. As supervisors, as we all know, start by asking yourself what are we doing today and what could realistically hurt my staff, my employees at the workplace? The second one is to know your audience or in other words, your workers. Think about who you're talking to. So for example, are there new workers? Are there experienced workers? Are there folks of all different trades in your workplace? Are there workers who have seen risks before, who have not?

Are there new immigrants? ESL? There's a lot of factors that come to play with who you work with. So understanding and knowing your workers will allow you to tailor your safety talk and make it relevant and specific. Third, this is my favourite one, use real life examples when you can. We all know stories stick. If you've got a past incident, a near miss, or something that happened on another worksite, share it. This makes it real instantly. Karolina, is there anything I missed? Anything you'd like to share?

Karolina Chelminiak:

Absolutely. So identify the issues and be purposeful in what you do. Think about how the human brain learns and what motivates someone to change their behaviour. So for example, if you have a roofing company with seven workers who consistently refuse or forget to tie-off at the start of the day, what are you going to do to actually change their behavior? Well, research in modern neuroscience actually points to seven factors that allow people to change their behavior. So these are attention, emotion, repetition, practice, environment, motivation, and feedback. So let's take a look at some of these examples.

Attention. If your workers have ADHD or some sort of a problem at home, they're not going to pay attention and no learning will take place. So be mindful and aware of what is happening in your worker's life.

Emotion. Emotion can be seen as a highlighter for your content. So, anything that creates joy or stress or anger or surprise or curiosity will be much more memorable than anything that is emotionally neutral, such as just talking about straight legislation, for example.

Maren Gamble:

Everybody's favourite.

Karolina Chelminiak:

Exactly. Repetition. So we all know that actively recalling and repeating things strengthens your neural pathways in your brain, therefore your brain actually retains the information.

Practice, also very simple. People learn by doing. So if you have an opportunity to practice something, you're again strengthening the neural pathways.

Feedback is very interesting, because immediate and very specific feedback helps the brain to adjust and improve performance. And the way this happens is your brain is actually a constant prediction-making machine. So it constantly, every second of your life asks the question, is this correct? If something is correct, it actually strengthens the neural pathway and the brain retains the information. If it's incorrect, it changes its internal model to ensure that the next time this occurs, you make the correct choice. And that's actually called a prediction error. And prediction error is the fundamental mechanism for learning.

So, the brain constantly asks, "what happened and what is expected to happen?" And this occurs when you're brushing your teeth or lifting weights or learning to drive or developing safer work habits. It's the same mechanism all across.

The next factor is motivation, and that's actually a key factor in any adult learning. So anything that's relevant and important to a person will allow them to make the behavioural changes and shift their beliefs. And this is why stories and details are very impactful. For example, residential construction roofing companies, so the example here again, you've got a team of seven people who refuse to tie off. With a hypothetical statement, so this isn't a real statistic, but just a hypothetical made up example. If you tell them that 24 workers died falling from height last year, that is not going to be as relevant and impactful and motivating as saying 24 workers died last year, and 95 per cent of fatalities occurred in residential construction, and these were workers who were age 20 to 30. All of a sudden you have relevance because it's the same demographic. You've got emotion. Uh oh, someone died. You've got attention. Uh oh, someone died and they're exactly like me. And that may lead to motivational changes and behavioural changes. So the more detail and relevance you can provide to an adult learner, even through something as simple as safety talks, is definitely more effective.

Maren Gamble:

So from that point of view, Karolina, what I'm hearing is, if I have a story that I can tell that's even just my personal experience, it's not even a statistic, but that personal experience, that single story that I can tell may be significantly more impactful than any statistic I could find on the internet or published on a website.

Karolina Chelminiak:

That's right. And if you do have a statistic, the more details you provide, like as in my example, the more relevant it becomes to the people because if it involves their demographic particularly or their industry, then they pay attention, right?

Maren Gamble:

That makes sense. Same thing happens when I'm listening to the news, right? When it hits close to home, when it's something that sounds close to what I relate to, I'm all of a sudden listening a little closer than I was before.

Karolina Chelminiak:

That's right. The other factor that you should consider is the environment. So the environment includes all the cues, all the routines, all the habits, and all the rewards that you receive in your environment. So this is why gamification is very effective. So we all love to collect points. We all love to receive badges in our apps. And why does that happen? Basically, the brain focuses on learning something, and then when it receives the reward, your dopamine, which is the neurotransmitter or a chemical in your brain, allows you to feel good. And when you feel good, you want to go back to the focus and the learning and then receiving another award, and that's called positive motivational loop. So if you're able to, through your safety talks, create a positive motivation loop, your safety talks will be much more effective and much more successful. So again, focus learning, reward, dopamine release leads back to another focus, learning, a reward, and another dopamine release. And you repeat that multiple times and that creates that loop. Incidentally, you could also create a negative motivational loop, so you have to be mindful of that. If you create any sort of stress during the learning, then the brain will release cortisol, the learner will get stressed out about the content presented, and then they will withdraw from the learning, and the withdrawal from the learning will release dopamine. So it'll teach the brain to continue withdrawing from that learning because it's causing you stress. So you have to be aware of whether you're creating a positive motivational loop or a negative motivational loop, because the negative motivational loop will actually not be effective for learning.

Maren Gamble:

So I really don't want to do that, the negative motivational loop. If I'm delivering a safety talk, I'm thinking about how would I interpret what's going on around me to determine what's happening? I'm assuming from what you just said that I could probably see some body language, maybe some signs in responses that someone's having that negative reaction to it in terms of...

Karolina Chelminiak:

That's exactly it. So Mike mentioned knowing your audience, knowing what is going on. Sometimes maybe obviously if it's a smaller team, it's much easier to do in their personal lives. Maybe they're going through something right now that is just not allowing them to focus. And even just the idea of the learner not being able to focus and listen to the safety talk may stress them out because they say to themselves, "I can't focus. Why can't I focus? Everybody else is listening. I can't seem to absorb the information." And then the brain basically makes them withdraw. And when they withdraw, they feel the dopamine rise and they go, "Okay, withdrawal here in this stressful situation feels great, so I'm not

going to listen. I'm not going to learn." And they sort of reinforce that negative motivational loop. So knowing your audience is definitely key.

Michael Estalilla:

If I may add, Maren mentioned about the environment too, making sure it is in a space where there are less distractions. As all of us here, we all learn different ways. We also know what learning looks like from a distractive perspective, which means it's harder to retain the information. So as folks leading a safety talk, finding that space where you know you're going to get the most attention from your workers. And secondly, you mentioned about the non-verbal cues, so understanding and identifying what are the gestures that they're providing to you when you're delivering that safety talk? Is it a positive one or a negative one? Are they giving you eye contact or not? When you're sharing your safety talk, are the expressions like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, that's not for me." Or is it their posture, just like what Karolina mentioned? Is their body language more closed off than open? So, finding those cues as well could definitely determine how well your safety talk is going.

Maren Gamble:

I'm picturing in today's world that person standing there who just has their phone out and is on it the whole time while you're talking. That could also be a cue that you might see that maybe they're not as focused on what you're saying as you'd like.

Michael Estalilla:

For sure.

Maren Gamble:

I think there's lots of things that we could see that fall in that category. I'll be the first person to admit that I don't know a ton about neuroscience, so I do have to thank Karolina for bringing some of that knowledge to the table here and bringing it in a way that we can understand how to apply it to a daily safety chat for those of us who haven't done the research ourselves. From what I heard from what you said, and also Mike, your pieces there that you started us off with, I tried to design the worst safety talk I could. So tell me if this is what I should avoid.

I'm thinking if I pick a piece of legislation from the green book that I'm going to read to a group of people, and it has nothing to do with anything we're doing on the jobsite today, and I make sure that I talk to my extremely seasoned workers about the most basic concepts as if they knew nothing.

That's my sort-of combo safety talk that I think is going to be as bad as I could possibly make it. What do you think?

Michael Estalilla:

Yeah, not happy about that one.

Karolina Chelminiak:

Well, looking at the seven factors, absolutely. You lost their attention. It's legislation, which is, I'm going to use the word very dry, although very important to know. You've gotten no repetition because they've heard it 50 times. You said they're seasoned workers, so they've heard it multiple times in their career. There's no aspect of practicing anything that you're saying. There's no feedback, there's no motivation, and the environment is flat.

Maren Gamble:

Okay. So if I'm going to plan a safety talk based on the tips you gave me, I'm going to avoid the one I just planned and I'm going to do a little better. One of the things I did also take from it is because as you guys know, IHSA does have a book of preset sort of safety talk content that is available. So what I took from that is that it might be helpful to start with content that's out there. We're not asking supervisors to always invent something completely new, but when you do find content like that that's developed, making sure you're choosing a topic first that is completely appropriate to what the workers are actually doing and not being afraid to make it your own. So there's the base content, but I have a story. There's the base content, but this recently happened in the news.

There's the base content, but I found this statistic. So not feeling like just because it was made by the IHSA that you can't make it yours in your specific scenario because that is the beauty of a safety talk is that it's yours in your space and nobody knows that better than you. Is that fair? What do you think?

Karolina Chelminiak:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Michael Estalilla:

I agree.

Maren Gamble:

Nailed it. Thanks guys. So after we've planned the talk, the next big thing is we can't just plan it, have a great piece of paper, and that's the end of the story. Part of the story has to be about delivering that safety talk. So for a lot of supervisors I know that delivering talks, informal training, facilitating these chats, it's maybe not something they have a ton of practice with prior to the rules. So what are some of your best tips and tricks for someone who's delivering a safety talk?

Michael Estalilla:

Yeah, Maren, you took the words right out of my mouth. Practice your safety talk. And I like to frame it in a couple ways. First, as someone who is delivering the safety talk, practice it. And that might sound very silly, like you standing in front of the mirror at home or just in your car for a few minutes before you're delivering that safety talk, practice it because that's where maybe you would remember a story or a stat that you want to bring into the table. Practicing it allows you to feel more comfortable and it makes it more conversational. On the flip side, if you are, for example, learning a new tool, having your workers practice that tool instead of just saying, "This is the new tool, we're working on it today, go at it." Making that safety talk, "This is the new tool. Let's all pass it around. If anyone has any questions on

how to use this tool, let's have a conversation about it." So it really goes both ways because then it allows the entire work site in the workplace to feel more included in the actual safety talk itself.

Maren Gamble:

I wonder to that point, even if it's not a new tool, but it is, say, entering a new phase of the job, so it's a tool that a lot of people would have used before, but you know you have a mix of new and veteran workers, maybe there's an opportunity there to even get your veteran workers to help show off how to use the tool safely to support those newer workers in that setting.

Michael Estalilla:

Exactly. Because then to be quite honest, again, it allows more people to be involved versus just you standing in front of your colleagues and your workers delivering the safety talk on your own, right?

Maren Gamble:

Yeah. And I mean, you can use the local expert as opposed to feeling like you need to be the expert as the supervisor. Sometimes there will be people who have more expertise in specific tools or equipment than you do. It's bound to happen because there's a lot that goes on on these sites.

Michael Estalilla:

That was my best practice.

Maren Gamble:

Awesome. Karolina?

Karolina Chelminiak:

You can also create a plan or a curriculum for the year or for the season with your safety talks. When you have a plan in place, it's so much easier to implement and execute the plan and make sure that all the important topics are covered. But don't be afraid also to maybe surprise your listeners or your audience, your co-workers with a one-off topic or maybe if there's something going on in the industry in the given moment, just to challenge that brain's prediction error a little bit and just create a little bit of novelty as well in the learning environment. But definitely having a plan and a curriculum for the year or the season allows you to make sure that you cover as many of the topics as possible and provide as much information as possible when it comes to occupational health and safety.

Maren Gamble:

I think that's really interesting because when you say a plan, it doesn't have to be some big overwhelming, nuanced plan like what we would deal with when we're designing IHSA training. You're talking about a plan that's sort of a general sense of what the safety talks could be based on the phase of the job, the highest risks based on the work that you expect to have going on, the highest risks based on the time of year, the environmental factors, the things that you know you want to hit on in a year. And of course it's always flexible.

Karolina Chelminiak:

Yeah, that's exactly it.

Maren Gamble:

Perfect. And so what I think is beautiful about that is that I think one of the big risks for supervisors from what I've seen is you get into the thick of it, it's a busy phase of the job, maybe concrete's coming every day, you've got these long days pouring concrete and you're like, "Okay, what am I doing tomorrow? What is my talk tomorrow?" And it's easy to fall back into maybe you're doing kind of the same thing over and over or you're rushing through it or you just don't feel like you have the time to put into doing that planning step. If you have this sort of generalized plan documented somewhere, you actually have something you could just go to and say, "Oh, when we were pouring all this concrete, I wanted to make sure I talked to them about the safety data sheet (SDS) during some part to know what the hazards of concrete were. When we were pouring all this concrete, I wanted to talk about backing vehicles because all the trucks would be coming in." And so it actually helps you when you are busy to have that plan. It's just your go-to, helping to reduce the thought for you. And so I really think that's very interesting.

We delivered a safety talk. That's it, right? I planned it, I delivered it, I'm done. I checked the box. Honestly, it's easy to think that way. And I've caught myself kind of feeling that way sometimes too. I've got one every day. I did my one for today. Yay, it's done. I've got another one tomorrow and on we go. But especially based on the conversation we had earlier about you might see people withdrawing or not engaging with the safety talk, I think there's another phase to this that we need to talk about where it's how do we follow up on our safety talk?

Just doing it really isn't maximizing its effectiveness. How can we follow up and find out if that talk we did was actually effective in the way we need it to be?

Karolina Chelminiak:

So I'm a firm believer in what gets measured, gets done. So don't be afraid of creating your own benchmarks or indicators of whether or not your safety talk was successful. So for example, back to my roofing company, we've got seven workers, they're aged between, I think I said between 20 and 37, and you don't have a classroom setting, you don't have visual aids. You meet them at the site of the house that's about to be constructed. You're outside, it could be snowing, it could be raining, it could be very hot in the middle of July, and all you have is that huddle at the start of the day. So that is your reality, that is your environment, and that is what you have to make work for your safety talk. So maybe you can create, I don't know, just as an example, your benchmark, seven questions that you ask because there's seven workers, seven questions that you ask at the end of your safety talk that may be the review from the previous day's safety talk.

And as your benchmark, you will say to yourself, five out of the seven questions, if they can answer five out of the seven questions correctly, then my safety talk was successful. And if they can't and you consistently begin to see that they're only able to answer two or three, then you have to go back to the seven factors that I've mentioned and ask yourself, what am I doing about their attention? Is there enough emotional content? Is there enough repetition? Did I not give them an opportunity to quickly practice something where feasible? Did I provide feedback? Are they motivated? What's the

environment like? Are we all stressed out that we can't focus? And then consider gamifying it and making it fun. For example, if they answer five out of the seven questions correctly for two months straight, they get free lunch if it's feasible for the company.

Food is always a great motivator and it just makes it fun, right? So think about very creative ways in which you could assess whether or not they're retaining the information. And the benchmark could be four out of the seven questions, five out of the seven question, whatever works for your environment and your industry and your company and your specific team dynamics as well.

Michael Estalilla:

Sure. Yeah. And if I may add, if I could paint the picture from an instructional design perspective, really, really seasoned and veteran instructors, when we do these quote-unquote benchmarks or knowledge checks in our trainings and when they see that their participants aren't getting it, they don't continue on to the next topic. They go, okay, let's reinforce it. Let's see what's missing so that you're able to understand what's being taught. So if we're going to apply it to the actual safety talk as a supervisor, when you do your benchmarks and like Karolina mentioned, three out of the seven don't get it. That doesn't mean that you're not doing a good job, that just means you have another opportunity the next day to do the safety talk again, but in a different route or a different way so you could see if the progress is getting better each and every day so that you can move on to the next topic of your choice at the worksite. So to your point in the beginning, it's not a checkbox. It's for them to remember, retain the information, not just moving on to the next topic.

Maren Gamble:

And I think further to that, because I think that's an amazing point, I think that if it's a really safety- critical concept for what you're about to do, and you have now actually received information, whether they have at least understood these super safety critical points, because those are the questions I'd ask, what is the most important pieces of what I just talked about to keep people safe today? And so if there's some safety-critical concept that all of a sudden you realize is not in what's being understood from the day, it's an opportunity to go through that in a different way, to even accompany to the work location if you need to and do a demonstration if you have questions now about the level of understanding that the workers may have from it. So I think it's that opportunity to, as you say, know what to develop future talks on in some cases where there might be areas to expand knowledge, but also areas to take an extra step and add that practical component because that's something we certainly do in instructional design too, where there's some courses where we say, "Okay, this is awareness and knowledge is enough." There's other programs where we're saying we really want to see a practical hands-on demonstration of your learning, which is a different kind of assessment.

To that point, I also am a big fan of observation on the jobsite. So even if say we did all of this and things look good, I'm a big fan of knowing what I did my safety talk about, making sure that my supervisor's walkthrough that day looks at that. So if I go and I see everybody following the procedures we talked about, I'm writing that in my supervisor's log book. What a great piece of information to have in there for the day that we talked about heat stress and everybody was taking adequate breaks, drinking adequate water, wearing the layers. And if by chance I observe something that could be improved, that's an opportunity now again to either address things with a subsequent talk if that's the level of

concern or if it is a major risk to actually pause things and have some more in the moment learning to make sure that things are going on.

And again, I don't hide that from my supervisor's logbook. What's better than to say, "Hey, I identified an opportunity to improve and I took it." That's an amazing thing to be able to put in your records for the day. So I think these are the kinds of things that not only tie your talk into the day in your workers' minds, but tie your talk into the day in your own records and from an administrative perspective as well. So I'm going to put you guys on the spot real quick. If you could say one thing to the supervisors out there that you think they should keep in mind, just one top tip from any of these things, planning, delivering, follow up, what would you say is your top tip?

Karolina Chelminiak:

Mike, you want to start or should I go ahead?

Michael Estalilla:

Yeah, I'll go first. I'll put my sports analogy brain on. A coach said this to me, and I feel like this might be relatable. A coach could be the supervisor, right? Proper preparation prevents poor performance, the five Ps. Love it. And I think that's one takeaway I would like to end with. As the supervisor, you're the one that needs to properly prepare so that your workers aren't performing poorly. So when you're getting ready to deliver that safety talk, how are you going to effectively prepare so that your workers are going to perform?

Maren Gamble:

Wicked.

Michael Estalilla:

So that's how I would end it with. Yeah.

Maren Gamble:

Karolina?

Karolina Chelminiak:

I'm going to mention something that might also be very useful beyond safety talks.

Maren Gamble:

I love it.

Karolina Chelminiak:

As a supervisor, I think you should be very purposeful in what you do and very insightful about your team.

Maren Gamble:

So insightful about your team in terms of knowing who they are, all those different...?

Karolina Chelminiak:

What they're dealing with, what the environment is like, and how they're basically doing at work every day.

Maren Gamble:

I think that's really impactful feedback. Absolutely. Thank you both for that. And thank you for listening to our episode on safety talks. If there are any topics you'd like to hear us cover, please reach out to us at podcast@ihsa.ca. And as always, be sure to like and subscribe for more *IHSA Safety Podcasts*.

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