IHSA SAFETY Podcast

transcription

Episode 147:

Understanding the Health and Safety Representative's Role Part 2: Maximizing Impact

Host: Adam Carruthers

Guests: Holly Baril



Adam Carruthers:

On a construction site, health and safety is everyone's responsibility, but are we making the most of the people who are there to help us get it right?

Announcer:

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

Adam Carruthers:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*, the podcast where safety isn't just a policy, it's a culture. I'm your host, Adam Carruthers, and today we're going to dig into the real talk behind safety on the jobsite, one conversation at a time. In our previous episode, we explored the legal requirements, responsibilities, and purpose of the health and safety representative under the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act. In this episode, we're looking at how to improve beyond simply meeting the requirements and start making the most of your health and safety rep. We'll explore practical ways to involve them in day-to-day operations, encourage open communication, and turn their observations and recommendations into real improvements on site. Whether you're looking to enhance your existing health and safety program or maximize the value of your internal responsibility system, this conversation will provide you with practical ideas you can put into practice right away.

My guest today is Holly Baril, a health and safety consultant with the Infrastructure Health and Safety Association. Based in the Sudbury region, Holly brings experience in construction health and safety and holds her professional gold seal certification, reflecting her commitment to professional development in the construction industry. Holly is here to help us explore how employers and supervisors can get the most out of their health and safety rep, build stronger communication with workers, and turn safety concerns and recommendations into practical improvements on site. Welcome to the podcast, Holly.

Holly Baril:

Thank you, Adam. Thank you for having me as your guest on this podcast.

Adam Carruthers:

So let's gear up and get into it. Holly, many workplaces have a health and safety rep because the law requires it, which separates organizations. What can separate organizations simply from complying with the legislation and those that truly get value from the role of the health and safety rep?

Holly Baril:

You know, I love that question because this is something that I see really often when I look at health and safety reps or I have people in training classes. You know which companies do it because they have to. And they say that. They say, "I, I have to do it because legislation states that if we have so many workers, we need a health and safety worker rep." I don't even think they know what that worker rep's responsibilities are or the benefit that that person brings to their organization. So that's those companies that do it because they have to, and they don't really look into the why. And then of course you have those that say, "Awesome, great. We have a health and safety worker rep. You know, maybe we have people working in the field, so we have a rep there. Maybe we find a rep in the office or in the shop." And they're really eager to have more representation amongst the workers for the different types of hazards because they understand the value that that health and safety worker rep brings to their workplace.

They understand that their duties, we'll say, are to recognize hazards in advance, bring it up to the supervisor, the employer, and then the job of the employer is to address those hazards before anything happens.

Adam Carruthers:

It's not just a matter of checking the box because we have to legally have a health and safety rep. It's understanding that there is an incredible value having somebody representing workers as an extra set of eyes that can bring that value to the organization, to the supervisor, to the employer, and ultimately to the construction site and keeping people safe. Which makes me think, what are some practical ways that employers and supervisors can support their health and safety rep and help set themselves up for success?

Holly Baril:

I would say the best thing they can do is allow that health and safety representative to fulfill their responsibilities under Section 8 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act. And on top of that, listen to them when they bring up concerns and work together to resolve them. It really does seem very simple in essence, right? And it really should be, but I can say that for some reason, a lot of people have a misconception of what a health and safety rep actually is and what they're supposed to do.

Adam Carruthers:

And it really goes to our IRS talking about how everyone has to have that shared responsibility. And the rep has an important role with building that up. So, how can the supervisor and the health and safety rep build a strong working relationship, especially when they do have different perspectives on the priorities in the workplace?

Holly Baril:

Right. So we know that a health and safety representative is chosen amongst the workers, or supposed to be, and they represent the workers in the workplace. So it's, it's kind of funny because that worker is, is working, doing their job, but at the same time, you know, they do have legal responsibilities to uphold in the workplace as well. The supervisor, I'll say their main focus, although we know the main focus also is safety, but, you know, it is that budget. It is getting the job going. It is accomplishing all of those goals

and, you know, the rep is there to assist them. So it, it's good when a supervisor can understand the value of a health and safety worker representative in their field or at their workplace. It just brings them more awareness of the hazards that are possibly in the workplace that maybe they've missed because their focus is on something else.

The other thing too is the supervisors really do have to look at that rep as an extension of their own duties and not just someone who's, you know, maybe bringing up an issue or bringing up a concern from workers. They have to change their perspective on that person and not just say, "Oh no, here comes the safety person again. Everybody put your glasses on." We shouldn't be having those conversations, right? It should be, "Oh, perfect. Here comes our safety rep. Let's see what that person may have found or what they are bringing to the table today to help us keep this workplace safe."

Adam Carruthers:

I like that. And we know that there are some legal requirements where the rep is supporting the site and the super and the employer and the constructor doing monthly inspections, let's be honest with it, in terms of what their minimum requirements are that they need to do on site. But when we talk about the value of the rep, is there a way that we can get or assist with getting the most value in those day-to-day operations from the representative?

Holly Baril:

A health and safety rep can add a lot of value. First of all, you know, by listening to the worker concerns, I mean, that's part of what they're there for. And then of course, by ensuring that the supervisor or the employer addresses those concerns in a timely manner, of course. And we really want to try and avoid, having the interference of the ministry of labour, of the inspectors coming to site. You know, we want to make sure that our internal responsibility system is functioning the way it's supposed to be functioning. A couple of other things too. They can also provide some feedback to the supervisor regarding any safety issues or hazards that they may have come across during the workday, identify situations that may be a source of danger or hazard to the workers, and make those recommendations to the employer. Obtain information concerning the taking of tests of any equipment or biological or chemical agents in the workplace, and of course, be present at the beginning of testing.

Those are all the things they get to do as a health and safety rep. And then of course one other aspect of taking on the role of the health and safety worker rep is that in the event of a critical injury or fatality, they may inspect the place where the accident occurred, any machine, device, or thing, and then shall report their findings in writing to a director. And that's, that's really important. You know, the, the role of a rep is that proactive role and not reactive. So going out and doing your inspections, and we know that's supposed to be on a monthly basis, can they do them more often? 100 per cent. They can do them weekly if they so choose. I mean, the supervisor can even ask that worker rep, "Hey, give me a hand today. We've got a little bit more things going on. Let's do a few more inspections this month or this week. Beautiful. Let's do that."

And be that proactive health and safety worker rep instead of waiting until something's happened. And then workers in the field say, "Oh, yeah, you know, uh, yesterday we had a little incident, so I'm just letting you know. Oh, okay. Well, maybe we should have talked about what was going on in the workplace. Did you have any concerns before?" And I think it's also important to make sure that we

bring in that health and safety worker rep when we're doing an investigation, because again, they are the workers in the field. They most likely have a lot of good information and ideas to bring to the employer, to the supervisor, to help rectify these things that are happening in the workplace.

Adam Carruthers:

What I really caught onto when you were talking about proactive and reactive actions was what the rep can do. And from what I've seen, a lot of the times we rely on the health and safety rep reactively, after something has happened, to try to figure out what's going on. Are there any ways that maybe the employer can encourage workers to actively engage with their health and safety rep instead of only raising concerns after an incident occurred, after a critical has happened, after something has happened in the workplace?

Holly Baril:

Yeah. So this could be me, my years of delivering training at IHSA, but I find there's this misconception of what an actual health and safety worker representative is and what they are not, right? So from my experience, again, a lot of people think that a rep is, you know, someone who's going to take on that liability in the workplace and, "I don't want to do it. I don't want to be legally responsible. I don't want to go to jail," and all that wonderful stuff. And we have to explain to them that that's not the accuracy of that position, right?

So once we explain that to them, maybe they feel a little better about taking on the role. Now, from the other workers' point of view, I don't really know if they fully understand what a rep's duties are or the importance of having them there. You can explain it, but I sometimes wonder if people really understand. Some health and safety reps are told, "You have to go when you see someone in the field and tell them, 'You're not wearing your glasses. Put your glasses on, or I'll write you up.'" It's like, oh my goodness, no, that is not your job as a rep.

Your job is to say, "Okay, we have a PPE policy and we should be wearing our eyewear. If you don't have any, I can get you a pair." Then we report that to the supervisor when we're done our inspection: "Here are the things I found in the field." It's the supervisor's legal responsibility to enforce these things in the workplace. What that does is create a negative perception of the worker rep in the workplace. Nobody wants to do it.

I don't want to be the bad guy. I don't want to tell people what to do. I don't want to give out fines. That shouldn't happen. That's what many people think they're supposed to do, when in reality they're not. You want to look for hazards, yes. You want to try to fix them, yes. But that's the extent of it.

The other thing is that someone who takes on the role as a rep probably doesn't have any training. The employer should be encouraging that person to take some training or complete some online learning. It doesn't really matter what form it takes. Just give them something that helps them understand what their role is and what it is not.

Now, the other thing is that the rep is the voice of the workers. When a concern is brought to the employer, we have to make sure the employer understands that. I've seen employers say, "That worker rep does nothing but complain about everything." But it's not the worker rep. It's somebody in your

group of workers. Maybe not all of them, maybe not even half of them, but it's the rep's job to voice those concerns to the employer.

On the employer side, we have to stop thinking that person is causing issues when they're not. This is exactly what we want them to do. We want them to bring up concerns and issues in the workplace so they can be addressed before something happens.

Adam Carruthers:

You touched on so many things there. We're appointing health and safety reps by the workers, for the workers. In particular, we have them there because they're subject matter experts. They do the work, they know the work, and they know what's going on.

I also like what you said about getting them training. We have health and safety representative training. We have joint health and safety committee training and other resources that can help them become more competent in their role. Ultimately, when I see a rep or a committee member, I see someone who is an ambassador of safety in the workplace. They're not there to hold people accountable. But if they see something, they say something.

So simply asking a worker, "Hey, Holly, can you put on your safety glasses?" Great. If they don't, it's not the rep's job to discipline them. It's just to report their findings to the supervisor, exactly as you said. That's the supervisor's role. That's the employer's role. That's the constructor's role. The rep is there to promote safety, look out for everybody, and be a voice for workers.

I couldn't agree more. Now, what are some of the common mistakes organizations make that limit the effectiveness of the rep, and how can we avoid them?

Holly Baril:

Again, not to repeat myself, but a lot of the issues I see come from people not really understanding the role of the rep. If you ask people, they'll say, "Oh yeah, I have to do inspections." But that's not it. That's what they understand the role to be.

It's the same with employers. The employer says, "Okay, I have a worker rep chosen by the other workers. They're good now. They know what they need to do." Well, sure. But the mistake you're making is brushing it off and saying, "They're in place. I'm following the law. Now they just have to do what they need to do." The problem is that they often don't know what they need to do because they need training.

They’re just going around maybe doing an inspection and looking at stuff. And, and again, they're afraid to say something because it's their coworkers. They have to work with these people. So not everybody is cut out to be a worker representative, you know? And again, you have to be able to do this in a polite way, right? We know that. We can't just be rude and tell people what to do. You're never going to get anywhere like that. So again, we have to have the right person in place. The employer must be involved in this and must be involved in ensuring that that rep succeeds. Sending them for training, make sure they're doing what they need to do, provide them with all the tools necessary to be successful.

Another common mistake is when employers say, "I have to pay you to do an inspection while we're busy? Can you do it some other time?"

I guess we could do it some other time when we're not busy, but they have to be done monthly. So if we stick to a schedule, then let's get them done so that we are being proactive and not waiting until something happened and brushing it off because we just don't have time. I need you to do your job, not that job, you know? So I, again, I see that a lot. Even when I'm teaching health and safety rep program, the people that come in to the program, some are very, very new and they have literally no idea what's going on. Others are really good. They either have had the position for a while or have experience and just haven't taken any training. And they're great mentors to the new people because they tell them exactly that, right? It's not your job to enforce.

That's the supervisor's job. So get that out of your mind because we want to work collaboratively together with our coworkers. We're not against them. We're not against anybody. We're collectively looking to keep this workplace safe from any types of incidents at all and, and really any visits from the inspectors, right?

Adam Carruthers:

And you touched on a few things that I find are really important in terms of the timing of the inspections, doing it when we're not busy. Whenever I'm telling people about COR®and auditing and checking out our workplaces and all that kind of stuff, if you're not doing your checks, you're not doing your inspections when the work is being performed, you're not getting an accurate reflection of what are the issues, what are the opportunities for improvement, what are the, the safety things that we need to be concerned about?

Trying to do the inspections when the work is happening can give you an accurate reflection of where you need to focus your resources in order to prevent injuries, illnesses, critical injuries. So whenever they find that, it's about trying to make those recommendations or raising a concern. So when a when a rep does bring a concern, brings a recommendation to the employer, what's the best way that they could respond to keep the conversation productive and build that trust between the employers and the workers utilizing the health and safety rep?

Holly Baril:

Yeah. Again, I think the employer needs to understand that that concern or that recommendation does not come directly from the rep necessarily, right? It's the voice of the workers. Again, it may not be everybody, it may not even be the majority, it may be one person, to be quite honest. But their responsibilities is to address those concerns that the rep is bringing up. The employer needs to gather all the necessary information and make a decision as to the different controls or solutions that need to be implemented. And they need to take those concerns seriously. I think that's a big thing too sometimes, is if workers bring up concerns, maybe a supervisor or an employer who has been doing the job a long time or understands the hazards doesn't think it's a big hazard, but the new person or someone else does.

So we want to understand why. Why are they feeling this way? Why are they having these concerns? And really dig deep into that. I find there's a lot of quick fixes, right? Again, this is all stuff coming from when I'm delivering training and contractors are talking to me and, you know, we have an issue. Oh, we're going to do this. But is that really the best solution? Has somebody actually looked into it, taken the time to make sure that we found the right or the best solution to these concerns? Or are we just

putting a Band-Aid on it and saying, "Okay, here, done, go away. Check mark. Me as the employer, I did my part as far as responding to you in writing, and boom, I'm done." But again, it's the quality of the response. It's not the fact that you responded.

Adam Carruthers:

Yeah. It's trying to get away from that patting ourselves on the back that we've got a gold star for completing it and more so working on that culture, the behaviour, and elevating safety to a standpoint where, you know, we are all working together because I do remember being out on site, as you know, a safety representative for the company and going out and then coming back with concerns and telling the employer, "Hey, worker A brought up a concern," or sorry, not, sorry, they brought up a concern. Well, an employer asked, "Who was it?" That's not really important. They brought up a concern. We need to address it, and that's what we need to look at. And that helps build the culture and the behaviour around health and safety. Now, you and I have been around for a while. But do you think you'd be able to share an example of a workplace that had an engaged health and safety rep that made a meaningful difference?

And what could we possibly learn from that experience?

Holly Baril:

In my time as being a trainer at IHSA, I've seen some really good health and safety reps, and again, some not so good health and safety reps. And the difference isn't because people just don't want to be good at it. They either don't know what they're supposed to do, they don't have the support to excel and be better. But the workplaces that have an engaging health and safety rep, you can tell them apart from anyone else, their workplaces have great cultures, their workers are happy. People are happy to report stuff to the worker rep. No one's worried about getting in trouble. They know solutions are coming. And yeah, you can just tell the difference. They're in training. If I go to a site and I have to walk around with them, they're so happy to show me their site. They're very proud of it because they put that care into it and the employer tells them, "Please, please find something so that we can fix it before we have that visit from the ministry." You know, people understand, again, the proactive versus reactive stuff.

I think the other part of it too is allowing that worker rep to take the amount of time they need during the workday to complete their responsibilities. Instead of saying, "Okay, well, we've got to rush that inspection and that meeting because we've got to get back to work." It's understanding that these things are important, these things are what tells us what's going on in the workplace so that we can correct it better.

There are some companies that'll say, "Oh yeah, no, that's great. Yeah, let's do that." They never do anything. So it's just complete lip-service like that instead of practicing it daily.

Adam Carruthers:

And I think what people don't seem to realize is that whenever you have a happy workforce, a safe workforce, you have an engaged workforce, you actually end up being more productive, which means from an employer standpoint, you make more money. By not having injuries, or the injuries that you do have are less severe, not having criticals, not having medicals and lost-times, having first aids. And ultimately, I do believe all injuries can be prevented. And I think you and I both agree, if we do... If we

look back at our investigations from the time we've had, the injuries have been preventable, right? So having an engaged health and safety rep, an engaged team actually works towards that. So, how could employers actually tell they're getting the most out of their rep, and what does that success potentially look like?

Holly Baril:

The rep is part of our internal responsibility system, or IRS. And going back to culture and everything, if we build a good IRS system, then we're good. We have everybody doing their jobs properly, focusing on safety, reporting hazards, correcting those hazards. It's a simple concept when we think about it. And I think that also, you can help employers and supervisors work better and strengthen that partnership with their rep when they do these things. So you need to show your rep that they are important to the workplace and that you value that, we'll call it extra work, that they do to help maintain a safe and healthy workplace. And again, like I mentioned, not everybody is cut out to be that worker rep.

So when you do have someone who is super interested in being this rep and they want to learn more, oh my goodness, support that. Send them for training, let them grow in that role. You're only benefiting yourself as an employer. The more that rep knows and learns, well, guess what? The more they're bringing value to your workplace, and I mean, you're eliminating as many of those injuries and illnesses as possible by having them do a fantastic job in the workplace.

Adam Carruthers:

I cannot speak to this enough over the last 20 years being a manager, off and on. Some of the most successful people I have seen have been engaged health and safety reps and joint health and safety committees. By investing the time, the energy, and the mentoring into developing them, not only can you make your workplace safer, you can also create the next strong supervisor, leader, or somebody else who can make a huge impact within your organization.

All right, folks, that brings us to the end of today's episode. A big thank you to Holly for joining us and sharing her insights on how we can make the most out of our health and safety representatives on a construction site. One of the key takeaways from today's conversation is that having a health and safety rep in place is only the starting point.

Employers and supervisors need to actively involve them, listen to their observations, recommendations, and follow through when safety concerns are raised. When health and safety reps are supported and workers feel comfortable speaking up, we create better opportunities to identify hazards early, address issues before they lead to incidents, and build a stronger safety culture. So here's a challenge to our listeners. Take a look at your own site. Are you giving your health and safety representatives the support and opportunity they need to make a difference?

Thanks for tuning in. If you would like to get in touch with us at the *IHSA Safety Podcast* or have any topic ideas, please reach out to us at podcast@ihsa.ca. Until next time, remember, safety culture isn't something you have. It's something you live.

Announcer:

The *IHSA Safety Podcast*. For more episodes, tips, and all things safety, go to ihsasafetypodcast.ca. Thanks for listening.