

# EFFECTIVE SAFETY COMMUNICATIONS

## PART II

### “HOW WILL THEY KNOW?”

by

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*In Part II of his series exploring the universe of effective safety communications, Larry Hansen examines the seven elements of organizational communication and their critical role in shaping safety success.*

W. Edwards Deming believed that an organization’s ability to achieve ‘Quality Excellence’ hinged upon management’s ability to answer one simple question; the same question that lies at the core of ‘Safety Excellence’, it is: “How will they know?”

How will they know...what is expected? How will they know...what process to use? How will they know...if the process is working? And most importantly, how will they know... when excellence has been achieved? In this short yet insightful question, Dr. Deming captured the critical importance that ‘data, information, and profound knowledge’; a/k/a ‘effective communication’ plays in attaining operational excellence. Deming further noted that: “Numbers are numbers; numbers are not knowledge”, cautioning managers to seek ‘the good reasons for poor performance’; i.e., the reasons behind the numbers. Attaining ‘organizational intelligence’ requires that an organization develop systemic ways to obtain objective data, identify process variances, and solicit unfiltered feedback on cause and correction, three elements critical to an effective communication process.

Many businesses unfortunately have a bias for ‘quick and easy’, not necessarily effective communication processes. They focus on moving information, not conveying understanding. In addition, today’s ‘e-com’ world has fueled information over load that further threatens organizational intelligence. Consequently, employees in poor communicating organizations feel that they live on planet ‘NETMA’ – (Nobody Ever Tells Me Anything!). Ignorance may be bliss...but in business and risk management, it’s what you don’t know that can hurt (and will cost) you!

A reader survey conducted by Human Resource Executive and Risk and Insurance magazines found that although business executives recognize ‘employee communications’ to be a low cost way to address workers’ compensation concerns, only 39% of those organizations surveyed had an on going communications program. Perhaps this is the reason that Tom Lynch, past Executive of Lynch Ryan Associates contended: “Show me a company with high costs, and I’ll show you a company where employer and employee do not communicate effectively”.

And, what's the net effect of poor communications on employee attitudes and work performance? Cynicism, suspicion, and credibility gaps between executives and front-line workers wherein trust diminishes and performance declines. To succeed in safety, process leaders must improve the level of 'corporate intelligence' in their organizations through communication systems that work hard at working!

To optimize safety performance, an organization must examine the ways safety is addressed in key communication systems and integrated into the organization's vision, values, and mission. If safety is to evolve beyond programs to become part of the organization's culture; i.e., 'how business is done', it must be included in and reinforced by all key communication systems. It must be embedded in the organization's:

- **Core Guidance Documents** – Its written (and electronic) directives, specifically its Vision, Purpose, Mission, and Values statements.
- **'One on One' Contacts** – Its routine manager contacts and interactions with individuals and direct reports.
- **Formal Meetings and Training** – Its formal gatherings and scheduled skill building and information exchanges.
- **Feedback Systems** – Its systemic process of listening, hearing, gathering, assessing, and acting on critical performance information.
- **Measurement and Metrics** – Its reports, scorecards, and performance spreadsheets.
- **Recognition and Rewards** - Its 'WIIFM' (What's In It For Me?) performance management systems. and
- **Management Actions** – Its executive decisions, and management practices.

If any of these means are omitted, or compromise safety as a value, employee cynicism grows and performance declines. Let's examine these seven elements of organizational communication and their critical role in shaping safety success:

1. **PRINTED (paper or electronic) GUIDANCE DOCUMENTS** – If employee safety is to be important in an organization, it must be reflected in its written guidance documents and corporate position statements that define the corporation's basic beliefs and values. If senior management doesn't put safety on the road map to success, the organization will never travel down that road. Two of the most important documents are the corporate Vision and Mission statements.

What is 'notably missing' from this statement?

#### **MISSION STATEMENT:**

"The mission of 'ABC/XYZ' Corporation is to meet and exceed the goals of our clients. We are dedicated to delivering the highest quality of service for every project and every client. We are a customer-oriented company, and strive to create positive relationships

with owners, sub-contractors and suppliers. We will continue to utilize the latest technologies and innovative techniques to ensure the satisfaction of our clients.”

And, what is ‘most noticeable’ in this ‘Vision Statement of PSI Energy?

### **PSI VISION**

“WE WILL BE A LEADER IN THE EMERGING ENERGY SERVICES INDUSTRY BY CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND CREATING SUPERIOR VALUE IN A SAFE AND ENVIRONMENTALLY RESPONSIBLE MANNER.”

And, what is unmistakably noticeable in the unique way Scot Forge, an industry leader in Spring Grove, Illinois has visually integrated safety into their corporate Vision & Mission:

### **SCOT FORGE VISION & MISSION**

**S** – Safety  
**C** – Continuous Improvement  
**O** - On time delivery  
**T** – Total customer satisfaction  
**FORGE**

At Scot Forge, Safety comes first! And success follows.

**POLICIES, RULES AND SOPS.** Many organizations devote considerable time, and effort to the development and administration of rules, while they invest little in building trust. As a result, workplaces are policed by ‘rules’ rather than led by ‘values’.

These organizations manage by the ‘95 – 5’ rule. Ninety five percent of the rules they promulgate (including safety rules) are done in response to the inappropriate actions of but five percent or less of the work force. Consequently, rules are ignored by the 5 percent for which they were intended, and alienate the other 95 percent who never needed them.

We need to start building values for safe performance rather than sending out addendums to rulebooks that are rarely read and generally not heeded by those who violate them. In companies that are over managed and under led, safety is a game of chance; “Catch me if you can”. Employees don safety equipment and follow the rules while they are being watched, but as soon as supervision or the safety manager leaves, off it comes, and back to unsafe practice they go. In organizations that invest in building trust through the creation of ‘shared values’, something different exists...it’s called a safety culture. People behave safely because it’s the right thing to do...for them...their peers... the company ...and the stakeholders in the business. Behavior is guided by values and reinforcement, not bludgeoned by rules and punishment.

**2. INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP CONTACTS** – Studies by NIOSH, Boeing, and the Reliability Group, an organizational performance consulting firm have all identified the impact of ‘employee satisfaction’ on the level of safety in a workplace. The data

developed by the Reliability group has in fact, determined that the number one predictor of a safe vs. unsafe workplace is employee cheerfulness and satisfaction. And a key factor in determining employee satisfaction? Supervisors!

Unfortunately, human resource studies have also found that most supervisor/employee interactions are negative with the number of disciplinary notices sent to employee personnel files far exceeding the number of positive entries. There's also a growing body of evidence linking stress in the workplace to cases of deviant employee behavior... including violence! And, a primary source of this stress and often the target of stress induced violent behavior is 'the boss'! All this suggests that 'work should be fun'...but we just don't see this performance requirement in many managerial job descriptions.

**3. MEETINGS AND TRAINING** –Much has been written about the 'learning organization'. What does that mean? Quite simply, it means an organization committed to the ongoing development of the organization (all employees) at all levels. William Lareau, author of the American Samurai claims that workers in Japan and many European countries are 'smarter' than U. S. workers...in some cases two to three times smarter. But, he acknowledges, that this has nothing to do with individual intelligence. They are two to three times smarter, because they receive two to three times more training!

In the first year of the Clinton administration, then Labor Secretary Reich proposed the '1.5% Solution', an initiative which would have encouraged American business to invest 1.5% of payroll in employee training. It remains a solution not applied. In a number of foreign countries, it's not unusual for 3% to 5% of payroll to be dedicated to employee development. Moreover, in more advanced organizations, funding is based on 'revenue and/or profits', not just payroll. Performance literature has reported that excellence companies spend 2.5% to 3% of payroll on training. We need ask: "What percentage of payroll is allocated to employee training in our organization? An unfortunate reality is... not many managers know.

**4. FEEDBACK SYSTEMS (FORMAL & INFORMAL)** – Feedback systems allow problems to surface early, and provide a means for management to continually strengthen and reinforce the organization's core beliefs and values.

Feedback systems in many organizations often fail...not due to design, but rather due to administration. I recall one clear example. A health care organization attempted to improve its employee involvement process by installing an employee safety suggestion system. Suggestion boxes were placed throughout the facility, and employees were encouraged to provide input, which was reviewed and published monthly with recognition...an excellent concept. The program worked extremely well in its early stages, but over time, feedback diminished, suggestions decreased, and ultimately the program was discontinued. Frustrated by the apparent employee apathy, the administration engaged a consultant to help determine why the program ran out of steam, and how to rekindle employee interest. The very first effort to discover these answers involved meetings with employees to gain their perspective. It was quickly determined that the short-lived success of the program had little to do with a lack of interest or motivation. Employees were quick to advise: "There never were any pencils!"

And speaking of opportunities, don't overlook the opportunity to seed and feed the 'informal' communication systems in your organization... a/k/a 'the grapevine'. Most organizations regulate and/or place strict limits on employee interactions, such things such as coffee breaks and interoffice visits. Other organizations see these informal employee interactions in a very different way; i.e., as a chance for employees to exchange useful ideas at an operating level. I guess it's all about 'trust' and how you look at it.

**5. MEASUREMENT AND METRICS** – What is counted in an organization sends a clear message to employees as to what's important. If an organization proclaims safety important, but only measures production, quality and delivery, employees quickly conclude what can be compromised at the end of the month when shipping volume is down and quotas have to be met... "To hell with the guard...we gotta ship 10,000 pieces!"

An automotive components manufacturer with an extremely high accident rate and excessive workers' compensations costs driven by an Exp. Mod. of 2.60, engaged me to assist them in solving a LOSS problem that now was now threatening their ability to compete for future projects. This organization was big on visible measurements on the production floor. At the beginning of each shift, large scorecards were posted at the beginning and end of each process line displaying production and quality quotas for that shift. These were updated hourly by shift supervisors, posting production volumes and QC metrics against goals. This organization consistently met production and quality quotas...but failed to meet productivity (production/costs) goals...any guesses why? Indeed, "What gets measured indeed gets done."

**6. RECOGNITION AND REWARDS** – 'R&R' provides the strongest means for management to express commitment and communicate the values (what's really important) in an organization. What get measured gets done...but what gets measured and rewarded gets done well! There are 'two' very common reasons why at-risk behaviors exist in many organizations. Hint: the 'R-words'...failure to provide appropriate 'Recognition and Rewards' for desired behavior. In her book, "Unlock Behavior; Unleash Profits" Dr. Leslie Wilk-Braksick concludes: "The primary tool for unlocking discretionary effort in an organization is the application of positive reinforcement for desired behaviors."

A William M. Mercer, Inc. survey of 200 communications managers some years back determined that 'recognition for a job well done' was the top motivator of employee performance. It graded 4.9 on a scale of 6.0, surpassing money at (4.8) and job challenge at (4.3). The most powerful motivator of employee performance can be reduced to one word...THANKS, and costs next to nothing to deliver, yet positive reinforcement compared to the use of progressive discipline, it is a relatively 'usedless' performance improvement strategy in many organizations.

**7. MANAGEMENT ACTIONS** – Executive actions and manager practices are the ultimate communicators of how much an organization values the safety of its people. The three most powerful ways of establishing the importance of safety in a workforce is: by example, by example, and by example. Or as Tom Peters says: "They watch your feet, not your lips!"

How executives act determines how employees react. The true quality of organizational communication is measured by a leader's actions. If you want to assess an organization's communication quality, one need only examine the quality of the individuals who communicate in that organization. When executive decisions and actions concerning safety are consistent, employees, over time, believe that safety is indeed a core value; something they need pay attention to and support. This is called safety leadership, the 'missing element' common to all high loss (and low performing) organizations.

The literature is full of excellent examples of safety leadership, but perhaps one of the best I've heard of involves Zytec Corporation, a Malcolm Baldrige company. Most organizations have a structured and rigorous budget creation and executive review process which starts somewhere around the beginning of the fourth quarter of each year. In many companies, it's more commonly known as the annual 'pad, cut, hack, and trim' process. Zytec has a structured budget approval process, but unlike most other organizations, the safety manager's budget is exempt from review...it's first time final. Talk about sending a message of trust and safety commitment throughout an organization!

Achieving 'corporate intelligence' requires a planned, systematic process for gathering data, and building knowledge in an organization through critical communication systems. Safety communications that work are those that are integrated into the organization, and enabled by leadership which envisions and leads employees to a new communications world called "TMSIDAK" (Tell Me Something I Don't Already Know)...a strange place to most, but a 'very safe and highly profitable' one for some!

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