Effective Safety Training:
Tips for Engaging the Adult Learner

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Is Your Safety Training Like a Black Hole?

Safety training is important. You pour in time to prepare, invest company resources, assemble media and materials, coordinate schedules, concentrate and conduct good classes, and the result is anyone's guess. Will the training make a difference and improve performance? How will you know? Are you getting good participation and management support?

Safety training can seem like a game of chance, sometimes missing the mark, perceived as a waste of time and not providing the expected results. What can you do to increase the odds of success and really engage everyone in the safety process? Let's find out.

Introduction

Education and training are fundamental elements of any safety program. Employees need to know about the hazards they face at work, as well as the methods used to reduce or control the risk of injury. Managers and supervisors play key roles in this education process, and should be included every step of the way. Management sets the stage and creates the expectation for a safe work environment. Supporting the training effort, observing, providing positive feedback, and coaching helps the training content to come alive. When knowledge, understanding and skills are lacking, and management is unsupportive, safety becomes a game of chance, a game we simply cannot play.

Safety training is commonly divided into two broad categories: OSHA compliance training and hazard or job-specific training. Training for OSHA compliance is usually very straightforward. With a wide array of OSHA training content and media readily available, training on almost any OSHA topic can be accomplished quickly and easily. The same can be said for most job or hazard specific training content, except for specific controls or procedures that are unique to an industry, situation or hazard class. So, if it is true that there is a wealth of

training content and media for just about any OSHA or hazard-specific issue, why does training often fail to produce results? What can be done to improve the odds for its success?

So much of safety training is OSHA compliance it is easy to focus on the event, making sure that everyone attends or completes the course, and that records of completion are kept and available. Many employers take the easy way out. They plug in a video or sit employees down at a terminal to take the course, don't conduct a meaningful discussion about how the topic relates to their workplace, give a quiz, and then send the employees back to work. The bar for acceptable OSHA training is so low that most employers get by with this minimalist approach. The bigger problem is that this approach often crosses over into the process of training for specific job hazards. When you don't care enough to design a quality training course, your employees see this, and develop beliefs that safety isn't as important as other things at work.

It is very important to recognize that you are training adults. Engaging and involving them in the learning process is the key. When adults experience training in which the content is *accurate, current, and relevant to them*, the likelihood of successful learning and knowledge transfer increases dramatically. Before we discuss the needs of adult learners, and provide important tips for engaging them in the process, we need to understand how to design and deliver good training content.

The Starting Point: ANSI /ASSE Z490.1-2009

To understand why some training is successful while others fail, it is important to first read and understand ANSI Z490.1, *Criteria for Accepted Practices in Safety, Health, and Environmental Training.* This standard provides clear steps for the creation, delivery and assessment of safety training. We will not cover its detail here, but provide a brief overview.

The first step in ANSI Z490.1 is to conduct a needs assessment to make sure that training is the correct response to the business problem, or the hazard exposure presented. Training may not be the correct response, especially when process or design issues are present.

If training is an appropriate response, the assessment should continue and by clearly defining the audience to be trained, the course objectives (what trainees should know or be able to do after the training), the content to be covered during the course, the specific training methods to be used, how learning will be measured, how the overall effectiveness of the training will be assessed post-training, and more. It is suggested that you take the time to compare your training programs with the ANSI Z490.1 criteria. This will help you determine if the design of your training is appropriate for the objectives you want to achieve, and if it is on target for success.

Focus on Objectives and Understanding the Adult Learner

Next, if we assume that the design of the training follows the ANSI guidelines, success will most likely depend on how well you

- have identified clear, meaningful, observable learning objectives

- designed and delivered the training to meet the objectives

- considered the work environment where the training will be put into practice

- understand the needs of adults learners, and

- incorporate techniques for engaging and involving the learners

Adults will pay attention to training that is accurate, current and relevant. It also helps when the training is interesting, draws on each individual's experience and that of the group, and actively involves or engages everyone. The purpose is to create a sense that the training information is aimed directly at the individual and their needs, and is meaningful to them today.

Tips for Engaging Adult Learners

Educating and training adults can be challenging and is very different than teaching children. The biggest difference is that adults bring experience and bias with them. Children are more easily directed by authority figures and will follow the teacher. Authority makes little difference with adults. If the training is not accurate, current and relevant, adults turn off. Here are eight training tips for actions you can take to make sure your safety training is a success:

1. **Know the topic and how it relates to the work environment.** Though it may seem obvious, this is where many trainers fail before they even get started. In order to deliver accurate, current and relevant information the trainer needs to know the topic well, and how it pertains to those being trained. Take the time to observe the employees as they work. Note the specific tasks that relate directly to the topic of the upcoming training. Are they using correct safe work practices? Are there obvious deviations?

   Talk with the employees about their work and ask questions that will help to assess their current level of knowledge. Look for examples of safe and unsafe behaviors or situations so you can incorporate them into the class discussion. (*Note*: Be sure you take action to correct any unsafe situations or behaviors immediately) The fact that you have taken the time to observe the work and talk with individual workers goes a long way toward establishing your credibility.

2. **Align with other training and consider any sequential learning that may be required.** This would seem obvious, but successful training requires an understanding of the current knowledge level of each individual. Has other training been provided? Did it cover information that needs to be learned before your teach new information? Has it covered similar procedures that may overlap?

   If we were training high school or college students the sequence of learning would be well established and the pre-requisites would be spelled out. With established curriculum used in schools, the concept of sequential learning is fundamental, and assures that each lesson builds on the last. When it comes to workplace safety training, without verification it is a mistake to expect a certain level of understanding.

   Many factors can stand in the way, such as individual experience, cultural differences, language barriers, and incomplete learning of previous training content. Don't take a chance of missing the mark. A simple pre-test or pre-training evaluation will tell you assess how much the workers already know about the subject, and allow for modifications that will help you achieve your objectives.

3. **Respect experience.** Without question, there are individuals in the class that have some understanding of the information you are presenting. It may be from other training or through experience. Whenever possible, reach out to the individuals and draw on their current knowledge and experience. Sharing examples that clarify the information will help the employees understand, and then transfer of knowledge to their work.

    In preparation for the training when you observed and talked with the employees, did anyone provide examples or situations that would be worth sharing? If so, ask those who had examples for permission to call on them during the training to share their information. Look for stories. Can an employee offer a story that relates to the topic? Stories are great for illustrating important information. They help the learner visualize a situation and then relate it to something they may have experienced. This can greatly increase the transfer of knowledge to their specific work situation. There is an added benefit for using examples from employees. You have shown respect for their knowledge and willingness to share. This respect can increase the likelihood that they may independently coach or mentor others.

4. **Seek participation.** As with #3, reaching out to the class and involving everyone will increase engagement. Develop group activities that require everyone to perform a specific task, or play a role in a situation. Creating scenarios and acting out events makes the training come alive.

    Learning by doing helps employees understand specific skills that may be required. Try to make any activities or games fun for all. By doing so, you create a positive leaning environment that includes smiles and laughter. This encourages everyone to participate. They see that it is okay to ask questions, make mistakes, laugh at themselves in fun, and then to be open to correction and the introduction of new ideas.

5. **Build rapport.** Adult learners value a welcoming and friendly environment. Set an open and responsive tone that demonstrates concern for each individual. Show your understanding of the variety of their responsibilities and their motivation. As pointed out in Tip #1, by openly and actively preparing to teach the course you increase your credibility.

    The process of observing the work, talking with and listening to employees, assessing their knowledge, discussing their experiences, and looking for stories all help create the feeling that you care. It is this "caring" that creates rapport. The more genuine you are perceived, the more believable you will be. Your believability helps everyone listen and focus on the topic without bias.

6. **Offer affirmation**. Provide positive reinforcement whenever possible. Don't be condescending. Recognize that some adult learners bring fear to the training. By sharing affirmation, the trainer encourages learning.

    Fear is a powerful, deep-seated emotion that can stop learning cold. It is likely that, in any training class, there will be individuals who experienced situations in school or elsewhere that created negative feelings. The strongest of these emotions is the feeling of shame. Not learning something as quickly as others, making silly mistakes, or making an assumption that proves false are all common situation for most everyone. However, when

teachers, parents, siblings, playmates or anyone who has authority points out your error and does it in a negative or degrading manner, the emotion of shame can result. Shame and the allied negative feelings are very real and will make individuals fearful to share and even try new behaviors. By creating an affirming and positive learning environment, you help reduce these old fears and make it possible for everyone to try and take chances.

7. **Set goals.** At the beginning of the class, make sure that the learning objectives are clearly stated and that everyone understands what is expected. Next, ask the participants to set a goal for themselves related to the subject of the class. This goal should be behavior-oriented and something that they will be able to demonstrate when the class is finished.

   Individual goal-setting helps with knowledge transfer. When you ask the participants to set goals, provide examples of what you expect. Give examples that are close to the desired behavior or outcomes. With concrete examples, goal-setting will help the individuals visualize their work and what using the new training information might look like. Goals that are behavioral and observable create visual models, and lead to specific questions during the training that add clarity and understanding for everyone.

8. **Evaluate, adjust and move forward!** By following these tips, you will create an environment for learning that respects each individual, allows for better team work, and moves the organization forward. Be sure to thank the participants, and ask if they have any input that would make the class better for the next group. Some type of feedback form is helpful. If you see several comments about a part of the training take note. If there was a test, were there a number of individuals who had trouble with the same question? Consider the content and delivery of the training, and the wording of the test question. Adjustments may need to be made.

   Good trainers are good teachers, and by nature are always learning themselves. Finding good methods for teaching that enhance learning is important, so getting feedback from the employees helps you learn what worked well and what can be improved.

   Lastly, there needs to be follow-up after the training. An assessment should be conducted a month or two later to see if the goals set by the workers and the course learning objectives are being achieved. Assessment of the training is a key element of ANSI Z490.1. Based on the findings it is important to make adjustments to content and teaching methods where necessary.

Removing Barriers to Learning

A portion of safety training can be categorized as informational, and may not convey any responsibility or authority to take action. Further, the people in the class usually do not report to the trainer, so there is little if any call to action that will translate to the work environment. Consider the work area where the training will be put into practice. Are the supervisors onboard and ready to reinforce the training content? Is the environment conducive for improved safety procedures? If there are barriers, you need to know what they are and work through management to see if they can be overcome.

Cultural barriers are common and may stand in the way. Clues that something is wrong culturally are found through perception surveys, or during conversations with the workers and their supervisors. A common definition for the workplace culture is "the common set of beliefs that drive behavior." When you hear, "that's not the way things are done here," or "don't worry about wearing that pace shield, this will only take a minute," these are clues that the culture may not be in alignment with the training objectives or content you plan to teach. It is important to discuss any cultural misalignment, and address them before the training. When senior managers understand the importance of the safety issues, the implications and why the training is important, they will provide the support you need. A great way to overcome some cultural barriers is to include managers and supervisors in the training with their employees. Once aware and trained, the managers are better able to discuss safety, set priorities and drive lasting change.

Conclusion

By following the ANSI Z490.1 criteria and the tips for engaging adult learners we discussed in this paper, you will increase your odds for successful training outcomes. Always remember that adults are much different than young children when it comes to learning. Lecture doesn't work very well. Adults need to engage and see through the eyes of experience how this new information or skill will transfer to their work, making it better. Adults also require respect and a clear understanding of what's in it for them. Keeping this and the tips we've provided in mind will make the training fun, relevant and interesting.

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