Peer-to-Peer
Safety Feedback

Engaging in Effective Safety Conversations

By David Frances

IN BRIEF
•**When workers observe a colleague behaving unsafely, they are confronted with a dilemma: Provide appropriate feedback and risk an argument, or say nothing.**
•**Interpersonal feedback is risky because, in addition to criticizing the problematic behavior, feedback givers may, purposely or otherwise, criticize the person who is performing the behavior.**
•**This article presents five steps to effective safety feedback that enable a peer to "do the right thing" without jeopardizing his/her relationships.**

Who sees more unsafe behavior on the job, the line manager, the SH&E manager or workers? As one occupational physician says (on condition of anonymity), "The guys on the floor see more violations than all the managers combined. But, they don't always report them."

With due respect to managers everywhere, it would be hard to argue otherwise. Whenever risky behavior occurs on the job, a co-worker often is in the best position to see it. Whether it is a power plant engineer without ear protection or a crane operator who is talking on his cell phone or an accountant walking down stairs with his arms full, his/her behavior is most likely to be observed by a colleague. Yet, these observations often fail to result in constructive peer-to-peer feedback and, consequently, in safer behavior.

Is this true because employees do not care about safety? Is it because workers do not care about other workers? Is it because they just do not value their own observations? In most cases, the answers are no, no and no. Instead, the most typical answer is that they do not want to start an argument. Unfortunately, for many people, feedback is just as likely to result in unwanted conflict as improved behavior. This lack of communication is unfortunate because without feedback, risky behavior is likely to continue.

The Risks of Feedback

Even the most benevolent feedback has risks. Consider how often people avoid giving non-work-related feedback at home to loved ones. Beneficial as they might be, respectful feedback skills are not taught in school and rarely practiced in many homes. The good news is that these skills are not complicated and are relatively easy to learn if a person is motivated.

The problem with feedback—in a work situation, in a marriage, in any setting—is that the recipient may feel attacked. As a result, the person may become argumentative or defensive, or may even want to retaliate. To avoid having recipients perceive that they're being attacked, feedback must focus strictly on a person's behavior, not on the person him/herself (Robbins & Hunsaker, 2006).

Complicating the matter is this reality: What is offensive to one person may be perfectly innocent to another. Personal put-downs can take various forms, and they are often delivered automatically, without much thought, as a result of many years of habitual use. A put-down need not be overtly abusive, such as yelling or swearing, to be perceived as an attack. Common examples include eye rolls, patronizing sighs or accusatory questions.

For example:
•What's the matter with you?
•How many times do I have to tell you?
•Why can't you be like your brother?

They also may include judgmental statements such as:
•That was so stupid!
•You're an idiot!
•Duh!

Or overgeneralizations such as:
•You never listen.
•You're the laziest person who ever lived.
•You're always out to lunch.

Replacing such tendencies with respectful feedback requires thinking about what is said and how it is said, then making a conscious effort to improve. Parents do this routinely, striking a balance

David Frances, Ph.D., is CEO of EAP Systems, a Boston-area consulting firm that provides management training, executive coaching, organizational development and employee assistance programs. Frances holds a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Florida, an M.S. in Science Education from Montclair State University and a B.A. in Biology from NYU. He has delivered safety feedback training programs at the 2010 New England Region ASSE PDC and for client companies including Pfizer and W.R. Grace at sites throughout the U.S. Frances is a member of ASSE's Greater Boston Chapter.

between the person (the child) and his/her behavior. On one hand, parents express unconditional love for their children, while on the other hand, they have no problem criticizing their bad behavior. "I love you, but your room is a mess!"

Accepting a person and disapproving of that individual's behavior are not mutually exclusive. In the role of a parent, acceptance of children is labeled as love. In other roles (e.g., friend, employee, citizen), personal acceptance is labeled as respect (Frances, 2010).

Respectful Feedback

Everyone wants to be respected, and most people resent when they are disrespected. In fact, when people feel disrespected problems are likely. Suddenly, the person dispensing the disrespect (whether inadvertent or intentional) is seen as an enemy, and the recipient, a victim. This is true when disrespectful feedback pertains to unsafe behavior or to anything else.

To minimize potential conflict, feedback should be respectful. The five steps to respectful, safety-related feedback are:
1) Start the conversation.
2) Deliver the feedback.
3) Describe a safer alternative.
4) Listen to the response.
5) Close the conversation.

Step 1: Start the Conversation

For most people, starting a safety conversation can generate as much anxiety as asking someone on a date. The risks are similar. What if I bumble my words? What if s/he walks away? What if s/he gets angry? If that happens, I will have alienated my coworker and I will feel terrible.

To deal with these possibilities, it is best to use a phrase that gets a person's attention; is devoid of personal put-down; and usually elicits a laugh instead of an argument. For example, "This is a safety moment." Such a statement generates a positive reaction because it is unnaturally formal. Because of this strangeness to the ear, it is unlikely to contain any hint of personal put-down.

Imagine using this phrase to initiate conversations about risky behavior. Consider these common scenarios:
• An hourly worker walking up the stairs encounters his boss walking down the stairs, holding a heavy box with both hands, thereby preventing the boss from holding the handrail.
• A second-shift worker in a given area meets a first-shift worker in the same area who typically leaves work without cleaning up his area.
• A worker observes a colleague talking on the phone while operating a forklift.
• A manager notices that an employee does not consistently wear PPE.
• A person from IT sees a colleague in accounting standing on a swivel chair while changing a ceiling-mounted light bulb.

In each case, starting the conversation with a statement such as "This is a safety moment" helps to focus the conversation on safety, and it does so in a nonthreatening manner.

Step 2: Deliver the Feedback

Research shows that critical feedback is most likely to be accepted when it is descriptive and when it comes from a credible source such as a coworker (Halperin, Snyder, Shenkel, et al., 1976). If feedback is not strictly objective, if it is even slightly judgmental in its content or delivery, it can be disputed because the recipient may disagree with the judgment. (Of course, if the recipient is characteristically defensive, it might be disputed anyway.) For example, think of the difficulties created when a common expression such as "bad attitude" is employed. Other than acquiescence (unlikely), the typical responses are:
• No, I don't!
• You're the one with the bad attitude.
• What do you mean?

The last response makes sense in many situations. What constitutes a bad attitude for one person may qualify as inoffensive for someone else.

How does one keep a conversation as objective, matter-of-fact and nonaccusatory as possible? Three basic approaches involve descriptive language, impact statements and I-feel statements (Frances, 2010).

The focus of any feedback conversation should be a description of the specific behavior in question (Alessandra & Hunsaker, 1993; Bedell & Lennox, 1997). Judgments about the behavior must be avoided or the person will likely feel judged—and likely will not like it. Avoid judgmental phrases such as "not a team player," or "careless" or "oblivious." The observer may think these things, but should not say them. Instead, describe the behavior that prompted the judgments.

Weitzel (2000) provides examples of behavioral descriptions and corresponding judgments that an observer might make:
• He spoke at the same time another person was speaking (rude).
• She leaned forward in her chair, wrote notes after other people spoke, then said her thoughts to the group, repeating some things that other people said (engaged).
• She yawned, rolled her eyes and looked out the window (bored).
• He smiled and nodded his head (pleased).

Behavioral descriptions are typically linked with a statement about the potential effects of that behavior. This combination, a description of unsafe behavior plus its effects, comprises an impact statement. Such a statement answers the questions, "So what?" and "Why should I change my behavior?" Impact statements usually take the form: when-then, if-then, because-then or unless-then. They can be used to describe negative outcomes that could be caused by risky behaviors, as well as positive outcomes caused by safe behaviors.

Starting a safety conversation can generate much anxiety. To deal with this, workers can try to use a phrase that gets a person's attention; is devoid of personal put-down; and elicits a laugh instead of an argument. Such an approach focuses the converstaion on safety in a nonthreatening manner.

Figure 1

I-Feel Homework

To improve assertion skills, make a minimum of three entries/day. This requires making I-feel statements, out loud to another person, at home or at work.

Date	Listener	I-feel statement
10/3/2011	Bob	I get frustrated when you complain without offering any suggestions because the problem still exists.
	Mary	I'm upset when you ignore all the caution signs because we're more likely to have an accident; so, I'd appreciate your cooperation.
	Ted	I get very concerned when you send a text while driving because you could easily crash, and I'd appreciate if you wouldn't.

Suppose a person sees a colleague standing on a swivel chair while changing a ceiling-mounted light bulb. The person could use descriptive language, an impact statement or an I-feel statement to express concern.

For example:

•If you keep sending text messages while walking down the hall, you'll eventually bump into someone.

•When you forget to wear your PPE, you can get seriously injured.

•Unless you stay in the pedestrian area, you could be hit by a truck.

•If you always wear your eye protection, you eliminate the risk of being blinded.

I-feel statements, a third feedback element, are a powerful way to get a person's attention (Robbins & Hunsaker, 2006), especially when a person genuinely cares about another person's safety. Another advantage of expressing personal feelings about a situation is that emotions cannot be disputed. For example, if one looks a coworker in the eye and says, "I'm concerned that you'll get hurt" or "I'm uncomfortable when you send text messages while driving" or "I'm disappointed when you leave a mess in your area," the coworker cannot say, "No, you're not." Each individual is the world's authority on how s/he feels. Therefore, I-feel statements that do not express anger are a nonaccusatory way of giving feedback about unsafe behavior.

Despite their effectiveness, I-feel statements generate two concerns. The first is the awkwardness that many people have attaching appropriate emotion labels to particular visceral experiences. This is counterintuitive, given the fact that everyone possesses a lifetime of emotional events and thousands of emotion words in their heads. Yet, this disconnect is a common reality today. So, instead of succinct, three-word emotional statements such as "I am frustrated" or "I feel disappointed," people often learn to avoid emotional communication through euphemisms such as:

•I feel that things around here will never improve (prediction).

•I feel like a punching bag (simile).

•I feel bad (value judgment).

The most persuasive feedback about unsafe behavior involves a combination of descriptive language, impact statements and I-feel statements. For example:

•I get frustrated when you complain without offering any suggestions because the problem still exists.

•I'm upset when you ignore the caution signs because we're more likely to have an incident; so, I'd appreciate your cooperation.

•I get concerned when you send a text while driving because you could easily crash and I'd appreciate if you wouldn't (Frances, 2010).

Figure 1 presents a tool that can help motivated people improve their emotional expression skills. The task is to express a minimum of three I-feel statements per day, at home or at work, then record them, along with the date and the person to whom the statement was addressed. Positive feelings (such as confident, happy, proud) count.

The daily entries can be made each night and should be brief. But they must be recorded each day for this assignment to work. For people unaccustomed to expressing their feelings, undertaking this assignment will feel awkward and uncomfortable. However, based on the author's experience, if people follow these directions for at least 3 weeks, they can overcome their initial discomfort and significantly enhance their communication repertoire.

The second concern with I-feel statements is that no one wants to get overly emotional at work. To facilitate the appropriate use of these expressions, only the following eight emotion words are recommended for use at work: confused, concerned, dissatisfied, disappointed, frustrated, troubled, upset, uncomfortable. Words that evoke anger, such as annoyed, irritated or mad should be avoided, as they only encourage conflict. Similarly, soft emotion words, such as sad or hurt, have no place at work. People who stick to these eight designated workplace emotion words will increase their ability to influence others without being inappropriate.

Step 3: Describe Safer Alternatives

After coworkers have expressed their observations, described the impact of the unsafe behavior and expressed their concerns, what do they want the person to do? Such requests can be delivered without being patronizing or overly demanding through positive impact statements and I'd-appreciate statements.

Positive impact statements use the if-then or when-then formats to describe desired outcomes. For example, "If you wear your ear protection, then you're unlikely to get hearing problems" or "When you follow a checklist, then you won't forget something" or "When you hold onto the handrail, then you're unlikely to fall."

I'd-appreciate statements constitute another way to influence others, especially if their on-the-job behavior can affect the person giving the feedback.

To improve listening skills, make a minimum of three entries/day. This requires making acknowledging statements, out loud, at home or at work.

Date	Speaker	Acknowledging statement
10/3/2011	Joe	I see what you mean.
	Bill	I don't understand how this impacts safety.
	Terry	I see your point, but I disagree with your interpretation.

For example, "I'd appreciate if you would clean up all chemical puddles before the end of your shift" or "I'd appreciate if you would not talk on the cell phone when you drive me around the site."

Step 4: Listen to the Response

Think of a disrespectful person. Chances are this person does not listen. Failing to listen is a defining characteristic of disrespect because not listening communicates, "I don't care about what you are saying." People interested in avoiding an argument must listen respectfully to their coworkers' responses, even if they disagree. The components of respectful, active listening are:

• Maintain eye contact.
• Deliver small "uh-huh" head nods.
• Assume a receptive posture (no crossed arms).
• Make acknowledging statements.

Acknowledging statements are overt verbalizations which tell the speaker that s/he has been heard. One type of acknowledging statement is the paraphrase, a statement that repeats, either verbatim or in essence, what the other person has said. This is the same technique used by excellent customer service people when they want to confirm the correctness of an order.

Another type of acknowledgement is a reflective statement that dovetails with what the speaker has said (e.g., "sounds like," "looks as if," "so what you're telling me is"). To employ these listening elements effectively, a person must truly listen. Figure 2 presents a tool that can be used to build better listening skills. In this case, three acknowledging statements are recorded per day on the data sheet. Based on the author's experience, at least 3 weeks of diligent expressing and recording are required to begin developing the ability to actively listen.

Step 5: Close the Conversation

By giving a coworker safety-related feedback, employees perform an essential part of their job. Such efforts also may result in fewer injuries. Consequently, the most honest way to end this type of conversation is with an I-statement such as, "I just don't want anybody to get hurt" or "I don't want you to get hurt" or "I don't want to get hurt." At least one of these statements must be true.

Conclusion

The best advice about what to do when peer feedback is warranted is "just do it." It is the right thing to do and it is an important part of everyone's job. However, even if the feedback is delivered as respectfully as possible, it may not always be gratefully received. People who need to be perceived as

After a coworker shares an observation, describes the impact of the risky behavior and expresses concern, s/he can deliver a request for change through positive impact statements and I'd-appreciate statements.

perfect, for example, will rarely give a benevolent feedback-giver the satisfaction of suggesting otherwise. Avoid arguing with such people. The important thing to remember is that the message has been delivered and it has likely been heard. So, even though feedback-givers may not be thanked, their efforts will increase the likelihood of fewer incidents and injuries, which, after all, is the whole point. **PS**

References

Alessandra, T. & Hunsaker, P. (1993). *Communicating at work.* New York: Fireside.

Bedell, J. & Lennox, S. (1997). *Handbook for communication and problem-solving skills training.* New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Frances, D. (2010). *This is a safety moment!* Boston: EAP Systems Press.

Halperin, K., Snyder, C.R., Shenkel, R.J., et al. (1976). Effect of source status and message favorability on acceptance of personality feedback. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 2,* 85-88.

Harvard Business School Press. (2006). *Giving feedback: Expert solutions to everyday challenges.* Boston: Author.

Hunsaker, P. & Alessandra, A.J. (1980). *The art of managing people.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Larkin, T.J. & Larkin, S. (1999). Reaching and changing frontline employees. In *Harvard Business Review on effective communication* (pp. 145-169). Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Robbins, S. & Hunsaker, P. (2006). *Training in interpersonal skills.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.

Weitzel, S.R. (2000). *Feedback that works: How to build and deliver your message.* Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.