

Make a Good Toolbox Talk Better

Although training is an integral part of any health and safety program, doing it effectively is often easier said than done. The “Toolbox Talk” is commonly used as a refresher to remind workers of specific safety topics that may apply to a certain jobsite, task or seasonal safety issue. When presented well these talks can be an efficient way to get employees focus on a safety topic that they will soon be facing.

Typically a toolbox talk is a short lesson given weekly at the beginning of the work shift. As with any teacher in any educational setting, some individuals are better at presenting information than others. Why is that, is it because some are just naturally gifted in the “art” of teaching or that others are more knowledgeable in the subject area? The answer may be yes but there are ways for anyone to improve the presentation skills necessary to conduct an effective toolbox talk. Studies show that there is a commonality among those that are more effective educators. These characteristics include:

Organizational Skills and a Straightforward Presentation

All toolbox talks are not created equal; when giving one the presenter should have the talk well prepared and logically organized. The more comfortable one is with the presentation the more naturally and effectively the talk will flow. If the presenter appears to be unorganized and uncertain of the presentation the audience, in this case, a shift of construction workers will quickly pick up on this and lose interest in the material.

Enthusiasm

We’ve all been to a talk where the presenter spoke in a monotonic voice with little or no expression. The audience would probably soon lose interest in the topic being discussed. The speaker may have been well prepared, organized and very knowledgeable of the material at hand but how the material is presented is almost as important as the content. The speaker has to “sell” the topic, make the audience feel the passion the presenter feel for the subject matter. If a speaker projects their interest and enthusiasm for a subject it can, many times, infect the audience causing them to feel this enthusiasm and believe in the importance of the information.

Presenter's Knowledge

Another factor that can make or break a Toolbox talk is the presenter's comfort level with the topic at hand. There is a definite connection between a presenter's knowledge base about a specific topic and their comfort level in presenting the material. The more familiar someone is with the information to be presented the more smoothly the talk will flow.

There's a lot of truth to the saying that knowledge is power. The more informed someone is on a topic the easier it will be to present with confidence.

Although it is important to appear to be an expert on the information, it is just as important to admit when the information isn't right there. There is no sin in not knowing everything and it can be important for employees at the talk to see that the expert sometimes has to ask questions and do research to find out what the right answer might be.

Group teaching

Many polls have shown that public speaking ranks as one of the most common of humanity's fears. A well organized, fact-filled presentation can help to calm some of these fears, as can good advance preparation. It is also important to remember that when presenting to a group not all members will have the same background knowledge. A Toolbox talk will definitely attract a group with different background knowledge. At any one site there will be employees with decades of practical experience as well as those on their first jobsite. In this situation, it is important not to assume the employees all have the same level of knowledge and expertise. Some may certainly already have the basic information but when it comes to safety, repetition can be a good way to reinforce an important safety topic.

Modeling of professionalism

When doing a presentation on safety it is important that the presenter follow their own safety recommendations. The employees must feel that the presenter is not only talking about the topic but that they also buy into the safety topic at hand. It is crucial to any safety program that the employees feel that the management is behind the program and feels that the employees' safety is important to the company's success. This trickles all the way down to Toolbox talks; if the safety concepts are followed by the presenter it will signal to the employees that safety should be a major concern to everyone. Remember: Actions speak louder than words.

Many in education refer to their job as “acting out a part”. This refers to the enthusiasm and interest level the presenter projects to the audience. This can be the difference between a successful Toolbox talk and a failure. Your employees’ safety may depend on the quality of these presentations and what they take away from the talks.

For additional help with safety and OSHA compliance, take advantage of the resources available through NCMA. These resources include the NCMA Block Plant Safety Software. The software is available from NCMA at (703) 713-1900 at a cost of \$150 for up to 3 plants/year (nonmember \$450).