Communication in Multilingual Environments: Clarity Saves Lives Picture This



This image shows a construction site pre-shift safety briefing taking place outdoors at the start of the workday. A supervisor stands at the front of a group of eight workers, speaking quickly in English and pointing at a hand-drawn site diagram. Several workers in the group are nodding, but their expressions show confusion rather than comprehension. Two workers near the back are quietly exchanging glances, unsure of what has just been communicated. No interpreter is present. The safety handout distributed before the meeting is printed in English only. A worker who speaks limited English holds it upside down briefly before turning it over, uncertain where to begin reading. The site behind them has multiple active hazard zones — an elevated platform, a crane in operation, and a recently trenched area — none of which were pointed out in a language the majority of the crew understood.

Every worker at this briefing showed up ready to work. Every one of them was handed a document. Every one of them heard a safety talk. And yet the hazards on that site were never communicated to most of the people who would be working around them. A safety

meeting conducted in a language workers do not understand is not a safety meeting — it is paperwork. Clear communication means confirmed understanding, not just delivered words. On any site where workers speak different languages, every hazard, every procedure, and every emergency instruction must be communicated in a way that every worker can actually understand — before the work begins.