Safety is a Common Language Meeting Kit

WHAT’S AT STAKE

A safety language is a collection of words, terms, and phrases that can be used and understood by everyone to articulate either a potential hazard or a desirable behavior. In short, it’s a common understanding.

WHAT´S THE DANGER

COMMUNICATION AND LANGUAGE ISSUES IN THE WORKPLACE

Workforces include diverse nationalities, ethnicities, and languages. This diversity ensures that a broad range of skills are brought to the workplace; it can also cause challenges, increased injuries, and fatalities when workers speak different languages. Workers may be afraid they will lose their jobs if they report hazards, injuries, or question authority and the unsafe acts of others. Different cultures and viewpoints also affect how workers receive safety messages and training.

Poor Communication Skills

Language barriers can exist even in a rather homogeneous workforce. Two people with poor communication skills may fail to grasp each other’s intended meaning when having a conversation. Even great, driven workers can injure themselves if they mishear a few words.

Language barriers increase the likelihood of injury and death on the job when workers with limited English proficiency don’t know how to do their jobs safely.

Intense, laborious jobs and those that require handling large machineries—such as construction, agriculture, and

manufacturing—are more prone to workplace accidents, but they can occur anywhere.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

COMMON LANGUAGE PRACTICES

Employees require training on the tasks and hazards in the workplace.

- Provide safety training and materials in the appropriate language(s).
- Use frequent and focused training, versus longer training sessions with multiple topics.
- Use hands-on exercises and skill drills.
- Use videos and pictures to teach, versus lecture and written materials.
- Train in small groups with similar spoken languages to make employees more comfortable.
- Provide one-on-one training sessions to demonstrate safety requirements and ensure employees understand these requirements.

Until workers can do a job, they must prove they have mastered the necessary skills and understand the required safe work practices. Use these techniques to judge the effectiveness in training employees:

- Watch your workers—eyes and body language can tell you if employees are confident in their training or skills. Offer more training and practice when needed.
- Have employees demonstrate complex job tasks to ensure they understand the correct procedures.
- Provide safety resources, such as safety data sheets, policies, and standard operating procedures in multiple languages.
- Post hazard symbols and safety signs on hazardous equipment and work areas. Symbols effectively convey essential hazards and warnings to everyone in the workplace. Use them to emphasize training programs, and safe work practices.

- Provide English lessons to improve the understanding of written policies and work procedures.
- Select supervisors with second language skills who can build a rapport with workers and gain commonly used “key” safety phrases.

The trick is to ensure that the language used is specific and widely understood. Saying “work safe today” to your employees at the start of a shift isn’t effective because the exact meaning is vague; work safe how? However, saying “keep your eyes on task whenever you approach a chemical container” will prompt people to check labels, keeping them safer as a result.

WORKER LANGUAGE TRAINING – MORE THAN SIMPLE TRANSLATION

- Training content providers are happy to simply translate the text of their English-language training into Spanish and provide that translation alongside or instead of the English text or narration. This bare minimum approach reduces training efficacy and does not go far enough to enhance learner understanding.
- To be effective, training efforts must go beyond simple translations of existing English-language materials; the format, content and messages should be customized for the target audience.
- Inclusion of multimedia elements such as sound, imagery and interactivity are all proven to impact the overall learning experience. **If these elements are not also translated, their impact is often lost.**
- Hands-on exercises, interactive training scenarios and supplied reference documents should all also be provided in the learner’s native language, and in a vocabulary that can be understood.

ONLINE TRAINING IS EFFECTIVE FOR COMMON LANGUAGE SAFETY

- Online training courses have significant advantages in many areas, particularly when it comes to occupational health and safety training. This remains true when it comes to providing training in languages other than English if the

training provider understands the needs of LEP learners.

- Online training can make it easy to have the exact same training available in multiple languages, and the self-paced nature of most online training can be very beneficial for learners who are struggling with language and educational barriers.
- Always look for all the same features you look for in quality English-language training, such as interactive elements and robust support options, and check to ensure the alternative language options are fully translated and contain all of the same elements. Avoid “bilingual” training that is little more than an English-language course with closed captioning in another language, as this is proven to be not nearly as effective as a fully immersive experience.
- The rising availability of training materials in languages other than English is providing training managers with a bevy of new tools, but it is still important for EHS departments to evaluate the efficacy of these training materials and to consider them only one part of a larger approach to providing effective training and supervision for all workers.

FINAL WORD

Workers who received training in their mother tongue report better understanding of and adherence to safety protocols, and employers report a decrease in injury incidents and a general improvement in efficiency and employee morale.