

Communication That Sticks How OHS Managers Build Real Understanding Company-Wide



Most OHS managers have had the same experience at least once. After rolling out a new safety policy or procedure—something that took hours of drafting, revising, and circulating—they walk onto a site or join a team meeting only to discover that half the workers didn't know it existed. Some had heard about it vaguely. A few had skimmed it. Others interpreted it entirely differently. And one or two had never seen it at all.

You can train, document, and publish policies until you're blue in the face, but the truth is simple and frustrating: **safety information doesn't automatically turn into safety understanding.** It has to be delivered, explained, reinforced, and repeated in a way that actually reaches the people who need it—frontline crews, supervisors, remote staff, contractors, new hires, casual workers, and everyone who makes the operation run.

Company-wide communication is now one of the most powerful and most overlooked components of a strong OHS program. The gap between what the safety department says and what workers hear is often the gap where incidents happen.

In this article—the second in your leadership and communication series—we explore why communication often fails

in organizations, what OHS managers can do about it, and how to build communication practices that genuinely stick.

Why Company-Wide Safety Communication Fails More Often Than You Think

The challenge isn't that workers don't care. In fact, most workers care a great deal about staying safe and protecting their coworkers. The challenge is that workplaces are noisy—not just noisy in the literal sense, but noisy with information. Emails, text messages, apps, dashboards, scheduling updates, production notes, and HR announcements all compete for attention.

Safety communication becomes one voice in a crowd. And if it doesn't stand out, it fades into the background.

This problem intensifies in organizations with multiple layers—executives, managers, supervisors, workers—where the safety message has to travel through several hands before reaching the front line. Every hand-off presents an opportunity for distortion, delay, or disappearance.

A safety lead in British Columbia once described this pattern as “telephone with legal consequences.”

By the time a new hazard control made its way from head office to the shop floor, it barely resembled the original guidance. What began as a clear policy became a vague instruction. And eventually it became a rumour about “something safety wants us to do differently.”

This communication breakdown is not just inconvenient—it's dangerous.

Most workplace incidents involve someone not knowing something they should have known, misunderstanding something they should

have understood, or acting based on a partial or outdated piece of information. None of those are worker failures. They are communication failures.

Communication Is Not a Memo – It's a System

Many organizations operate under the assumption that if information was “sent,” communication has happened. But sending information isn't communication. Posting a policy isn't communication. Uploading a document to the intranet isn't communication. Even training, when treated as a one-way broadcast, is not communication.

Communication only exists when understanding exists. And understanding only exists when the message is:

- Clear
- Timely
- Relevant
- Accessible
- Reinforced

If any of those pieces is missing, the message slips away.

Take, for example, an Ontario manufacturing company that rolled out a new lockout procedure. The document was emailed to all supervisors and posted in the break room. The safety department assumed the message had been delivered. But when a worker was interviewed after a near miss two months later, he said, “I knew something changed, but I didn't know how.”

The procedure wasn't the problem. The communication strategy was.

The organization had sent safety information. They didn't communicate it in a way that workers could remember, apply, or connect to their tasks. OHS managers must

recognize that communication is not paperwork—it is a system that requires planning, rhythm, and engagement.

Why Repetition Matters More Than You Want It To

One of the biggest mistakes OHS teams make is assuming workers will remember what they heard once. The brain simply doesn't work that way. Especially in dynamic, high-pressure environments where workers are juggling production targets, equipment issues, scheduling changes, and the pressures of daily life, a single safety message has almost no chance of sticking.

A safety professional in Winnipeg explained this perfectly: “I realized that if our crews remembered one thing I said in a month, that was a miracle. So I stopped trying to say everything once and started saying the most important things every week.”

It sounds simple, but the impact was significant. Near-miss reporting increased. Crews started referencing safety expectations without prompting. Supervisors began reinforcing messages naturally in their daily conversations.

Repetition does not create annoyance—it creates safety memory. And memory is what keeps people alive when a hazard appears.

OHS managers should think of themselves less as announcers and more as broadcasters. Important messages must be repeated across multiple channels: meetings, signage, emails, toolbox talks, and casual conversations. Not in a robotic way, but in a natural, conversational rhythm that workers recognize and absorb.

The Missing Ingredient in Most Organizations: Storytelling

Workers don't remember procedures, but they remember stories—especially stories that touch emotion, fear, pride, or shared experience. Stories create meaning. And meaning drives behaviour long after the policy is forgotten.

A safety manager in Nova Scotia shared a moment that transformed how he communicated. He told a crew about a young worker who nearly lost his arm because he bypassed a guard—even though he knew better. The injured worker later admitted he did it because his supervisor once said, “If it saves time, just do it.” That one offhand comment stuck with him.

The crew went silent. The message landed. Not because of the rule, but because of the story behind it.

OHS communication must connect to real consequences. Not fear-mongering. Not exaggeration. Just grounding safety expectations in lived experiences that make the message hard to forget.

Stories are not an “extra.” They are the delivery mechanism that allows safety communication to take root.

Why OHS Managers Must Tailor Their Message to Every Audience

Safety information isn't one-size-fits-all. What resonates with an executive team doesn't resonate with a supervisor. What a supervisor needs to hear is not the same thing a new apprentice needs to hear. Different roles interpret risk differently. They prioritize differently. They absorb information differently.

Executives care about liability, reputation, productivity, and cost. Supervisors care about workflow, time, staffing, quality, and daily pressure. Workers care about clarity, fairness, risk, workload, and whether they feel respected.

If OHS managers don't tailor their communication to each audience, the message won't create understanding.

One OHS manager in Alberta described sending the same hazard update to executives and supervisors. Executives responded with questions about legal implications. Supervisors responded with confusion about how to apply the change during shifts. Both groups had received the same information, but their needs were completely different.

That moment changed how she communicated forever. She began writing two versions of every safety message—one for decision-makers and one for implementers. Clarity skyrocketed.

Communication becomes powerful when it meets people where they are.

The Dangerous Assumption That Supervisors Are “Receiving Stations”

In many organizations, the communication system assumes supervisors will relay messages to workers accurately. But supervisors aren't communication devices. They're human beings under enormous operational pressure. They're juggling scheduling issues, production demands, interpersonal conflicts, equipment problems, and emergencies. They triage information constantly.

And when safety messages are vague, overly complex, or delivered without context, supervisors simplify them, distort them, or skip them altogether—not because they don't care, but

because they're human.

A Québec safety director once said, "I realized our supervisors weren't passing on safety updates because they didn't fully understand them." When she started briefing supervisors first, in plain language, and giving them talking points they could use, compliance and worker understanding improved dramatically.

OHS managers should never assume supervisors "got the message." Supervisors need support, clarity, and confidence before they can communicate safety to their crews.

Why Communication Has Become a Due Diligence Issue

Canadian courts and regulators increasingly consider communication when assessing due diligence. They look at whether the employer not only had policies, but also whether those policies were effectively communicated, reinforced, and understood.

Silence, unclear messaging, inconsistent communication, or "I didn't know" answers from workers all expose gaps in due diligence.

A strong communication strategy protects people from harm—but it also protects the organization when something goes wrong. It demonstrates that safety expectations weren't just written, but delivered.

Communication isn't just culture-building. It's legal protection. It's risk control. It's operational competence. And it's leadership.

The Most Important Shift: OHS Managers As Communicators, Not Messengers

The old model of safety communication was broadcasting information. The new model is engagement. Engagement means creating conversation—not just delivering content. It means asking workers what they think, listening to feedback, adjusting messages to real-world conditions, and building communication loops instead of communication dumps.

This is where OHS managers step out of the compliance shadow and into the leadership spotlight. Leading safety now means leading communication. It means shaping how people interpret safety expectations, how they talk about hazards, and how they understand risk.

Communication is no longer a task. It's a tool. A strategic one. And when used well, it changes an organization.

The Day the Message Finally Landed

A safety manager in Northern Ontario described a turning point in his career. He had been sharing updates about winter driving hazards for years—emails, posters, training modules. The message always felt flat. People skimmed it. Some ignored it.

Then one day, during a safety talk, he told a personal story about a colleague who died driving home exhausted after a double shift. The room fell silent. Several workers wiped their eyes. People stayed after the meeting to talk.

Later that month, near-miss reports for winter driving doubled. Seat belt compliance rose. Supervisors started checking in with workers before they left at the end of long shifts. The message had finally landed—not because it was

clearer, but because it was human.

Communication is not about information. It's about connection. And when OHS managers embrace that truth, their influence, company-wide, becomes transformative.