

# Elevating Work Site Communication How Supervisors Shape Safety Performance in Real Time



Walk onto any busy Canadian job site (a construction project, a factory floor, a warehouse, a utilities crew staging area) and you can feel the difference within minutes. Some sites are calm, organized, and focused. People move with confidence. Information flows smoothly. Hazards are discussed openly. You can sense psychological safety almost the way you can feel good lighting or clean air.

Other sites feel tense. Workers avoid eye contact. Shortcuts happen quietly. You hear confusion in the way people talk about tasks. Conversations feel rushed or incomplete. There's a heaviness in the air—a sense that production is the real priority, and safety is a box to check when time allows.

That difference rarely comes from the written safety program. It comes from leadership on the ground. And the leader who shapes this environment day after day isn't the CEO or the OHS director—it's the supervisor.

On a work site, supervisors are the interpreters, the coaches, the decision-makers, and the communicators workers rely on. Workers don't call the safety department when a task changes

quickly or a new hazard appears—they turn to the person standing beside them in steel-toe boots or a hard hat. Supervisors translate policies into action and turn safety expectations into behaviour. In that sense, supervisors are the oxygen of a safe site. When communication from them is clear, consistent, and respectful, the site breathes. When it isn't, the site struggles.

This article explores how OHS managers can strengthen communication on active work sites by elevating supervisors as the leaders they already are—and why that shift is essential for modern Canadian safety performance.

## Why the Work Site Is the Real Test of Safety Culture

Policies don't get workers home safe at the end of a shift. Equipment helps, engineering controls help, training helps—but in the last ten feet before an incident or a close call, what determines behaviour is communication. Not just formal instructions, but tone of voice, timing, clarity, emotional signals, and the sense of whether concerns will be heard.

A worker on a warehouse floor doesn't open the OHS binder when a forklift operator drives too fast. They look to their supervisor. A worker on a construction crew doesn't pull up a PDF when a task suddenly changes. They ask their supervisor what to do. A worker in manufacturing doesn't rewrite a JHA when a piece of equipment jams. They turn to the supervisor and say, "How do you want to handle this?"

This is why so many Canadian OHS investigations eventually lead back to the same theme: workers were acting on the supervisor's cues, whether directly or indirectly.

Some supervisors lead with clarity and calm. Others lead with frustration or mixed messages. Some listen openly. Others shut

concerns down. Some reinforce safety expectations without making workers feel foolish. Others communicate in a way that makes workers avoid raising issues at all.

Supervisors don't just communicate instructions—they communicate culture.

And culture determines risk.

## **A Story From a Nova Scotia Job Site**

A safety advisor in Nova Scotia once described a situation on a roadwork crew. The team was flagging traffic around a lane closure, and a supervisor instructed workers to “keep things moving quickly.” He meant efficiency. But workers heard speed. And on a site where vehicles were passing within inches, that misunderstanding nearly cost a young worker his life.

The worker rushed to reset cones and stepped too far into the active lane. A driver clipped one of the cones, which spun and hit the worker's leg with enough force to leave a deep bruise. It wasn't a serious injury—but it easily could have been.

When the supervisor reflected on the event later, he said, “I didn't think about how they would interpret my tone. I just meant we had to stay organized.” The lesson was painful: workers hear more than instructions—they hear intent, pressure, and implication.

Workers follow the emotional signal behind the words more than the words themselves.

That's where communication becomes leadership.

## **The Supervisor's Voice Carries More**

## Weight Than Any Procedure

Supervisors don't only manage schedules—they shape emotional reality. A worker might receive formal training on a safe procedure, but if a supervisor's tone suggests that speed is the priority, workers will follow the tone. If a supervisor walks past a hazard without comment, workers assume it's acceptable. If a supervisor visibly takes the time to clarify instructions, workers learn that clarity matters.

This is where OHS managers have to shift from being policy guardians to communication coaches.

A supervisor's voice becomes the voice of the company on the work site.

It becomes the voice of the safety culture.

And unfortunately, many supervisors have never been trained in leadership communication. They were often promoted for technical competence, not communication skill. They may know the work better than anyone else on site, but they may not know how to communicate expectations in a way that motivates, respects, and informs.

Without coaching, communication becomes reactive instead of intentional.

## Why Supervisors Need Clarity, Not Complexity

Some OHS managers unknowingly overwhelm supervisors with technical terminology or dense guidance. A supervisor on a busy construction site doesn't have time to translate regulatory language into something that fits the moment. They need clarity in the form of short, direct guidance they can communicate in the field.

Supervisors need to know:

- What to say,
- When to say it,
- How to say it,
- And why it matters.

Not because they can't understand the complex details, but because their communication happens under pressure, in noise, in unpredictable conditions, and often with workers who learn best through demonstration and plain language.

A supervisor on a wind farm in southern Alberta once admitted, "The safety updates made sense when I was in the meeting, but when I got back to the site I couldn't remember how to explain them to the crew." After working with the OHS manager to simplify messaging into "three things you need to tell the crew today," communication improved dramatically.

Workers don't need everything. They need the right things, delivered clearly.

Supervisors don't need more information. They need actionable communication.

## **Coaching Supervisors to Deliver Safety Messages With Impact**

When OHS managers coach supervisors in communication, the difference becomes visible almost immediately. Crews become calmer. Instructions become clearer. Hazards begin to surface before they turn into incidents. Workers begin to speak up more readily.

Coaching doesn't mean lecturing supervisors. It means partnering with them. It means helping them understand their influence, building confidence in their communication, and giving them tools that fit their style.

Some supervisors have a loud, commanding voice that workers respect instantly. Others lead quietly and thoughtfully. Both can be effective if their communication is intentional, respectful, and consistent.

When supervisors feel supported—not policed—they become the strongest safety advocates on the site.

## **Communication on a Site Is Fast, Emotional, and High-Consequence**

On an active job site, decisions happen in seconds. Instructions must be so clear they can be understood even when equipment is running and visibility is limited. And workers must feel comfortable speaking up when they're unsure—because uncertainty on a site can turn deadly.

One of the most underestimated skills in a supervisor's toolkit is the ability to slow the moment down.

A supervisor in Saskatchewan once stopped a crew mid-task and said, "Everyone take thirty seconds. Think about what could go wrong here before we continue." The crew was surprised. They weren't used to that kind of communication. But in the reflection, a worker pointed out an unblocked pinch point that no one had noticed before.

Thirty seconds prevented a crushing injury. Thirty seconds created a voice where silence might have existed. Thirty seconds demonstrated leadership.

Workers don't forget leaders who protect them. They follow them.

## **The Hidden Barrier: Workers Want to**

# Speak Up but Don't Know If They Should

Psychological safety is not an office concept. It's a work site concept. Workers on active sites navigate danger, pressure, noise, fatigue, and sometimes fear. They need to know their supervisor wants to hear their concerns—not just tolerate them.

In some environments, workers hold back because they don't want to appear inexperienced or slow. In others, they fear becoming the “problem” on the crew. A young apprentice on an Ontario construction site once said, “Everyone seemed so confident. I didn't want to be the guy asking dumb questions.”

He later admitted almost stepping into a trench without confirming its stability because he didn't want to interrupt anyone.

Communication should never make someone choose between dignity and safety. Supervisors have the power to prevent that choice.

When supervisors frame questions as normal, expected, and valued, work sites transform. Workers begin asking for clarification. They report hazards proactively. They check on each other more often. And they take pride in doing things right instead of doing things fast.

# Why OHS Managers Must Build Communication Rhythms, Not One-Off Messages

Safety communication on a work site is not a single event. It's a rhythm. A cadence. A predictable pattern workers

can count on. When communication becomes part of the workflow rather than an interruption to it, workers begin to internalize safety expectations without being reminded.

Clear pre-job discussions, short mid-task checks, brief end-of-day reflections—these are not just procedural elements. They are leadership habits. And when supervisors carry them out consistently, they create stability and trust.

OHS managers must help supervisors build these rhythms. Not by adding more paperwork, but by simplifying communication to its essential elements. Not by scripting every word, but by giving supervisors the tools to deliver messages authentically. Supervisors shouldn't sound like safety binders. They should sound like leaders.

## **A Real-World Transformation on a BC Work Site**

A utilities crew in British Columbia was experiencing repeated near misses involving vehicle movement. The OHS department delivered training, sent out memos, and updated procedures, but the incidents continued.

When the safety manager joined the crew for a week, the issue became obvious: the supervisor gave rushed, vague instructions. Workers didn't know when to reposition, where to stand, or how to coordinate movement. The supervisor wasn't negligent—he simply didn't realize how unclear he sounded.

The OHS manager coached him privately on slow, clear, assertive communication. They practiced phrasing. They practiced pausing. They practiced giving direction with confidence.

Within three weeks, the near misses disappeared. Within six weeks, workers reported feeling “significantly safer.” Within



two months, the supervisor was mentoring others.

The lesson wasn't about training or policy; it was about communication. Safety improved because communication improved. And communication improved because the OHS manager invested in leadership.

## **When Workers Believe in Their Leaders, Safety Becomes Self-Sustaining**

Work sites where communication flows easily are sites where workers look out for each other. They anticipate hazards voluntarily. They correct each other without hesitation. They speak up early. They slow down when something feels wrong. They trust their supervisor enough to admit uncertainty.

These workers are not reacting to rules—they are responding to leadership.

When supervisors communicate consistently and respectfully, workers internalize safety expectations in a way that lasts. The crew becomes the safety program. And OHS managers become the strategic partners who support, guide, and elevate them.

## **The Supervisor's Influence Is the Most Underestimated Safety Control in Canada**

Engineering controls reduce hazard exposure. Administrative controls set expectations. PPE mitigates harm. But supervisor communication determines whether any of those controls work when the pressure is on.

When OHS managers invest in developing supervisors as communicators and leaders, they change everything:

- They change how workers understand risk.
- They change how crews respond to instructions.
- They change how incidents are prevented.
- They change how safety feels, not just how it's managed.

And in the end, that's what a real safety culture is: not a program, not a binder, not a set of rules, but a feeling of trust, clarity, and shared protection that begins with the way leaders speak.