Worker Voice Is a Safety Control



The Legal Right That Often Underperforms in Practice

Canadian occupational health and safety law is built on a foundational principle: workers have the right to participate in their own safety. This is not a philosophical concept. It is embedded directly into legislation across jurisdictions through mechanisms such as Joint Health and Safety Committees (JHSCs) and worker representatives. These structures are intended to create a formal channel through which workers can identify hazards, raise concerns, and contribute to the design of safer work environments.

On paper, this is one of the strongest elements of the Canadian OHS system.

In practice, however, the effectiveness of worker participation varies significantly. Some organizations have highly engaged committees that influence decision-making and drive meaningful improvements. Others have committees that meet regularly, document discussions, and fulfill regulatory requirements, but have limited impact on how work is actually performed.

This gap is not primarily about structure. It is about function.

And function is shaped by something that is often overlooked in compliance discussions: psychological safety.

Why Structure Alone Does Not Create Participation

It is possible to have a fully compliant JHSC and still lack meaningful worker participation.

Meetings can occur monthly. Minutes can be recorded. Inspections can be conducted. Recommendations can be submitted. All of the formal elements can be in place, and yet the system may fail to surface the most important risks or influence key decisions.

This happens because participation is not simply about having a forum. It is about whether workers feel able to use that forum effectively.

If workers are hesitant to raise concerns, if they believe their input will not lead to action, or if they fear negative consequences for speaking up, participation becomes performative rather than substantive. Issues are filtered, softened, or withheld entirely. What reaches the committee table is not the full picture of risk, but a curated version that feels safe to share.

Under these conditions, the system loses one of its most valuable sources of information.

Psychological Safety as the Enabler of Worker Voice

Psychological safety refers to the shared belief that it is safe to speak up, ask questions, and raise concerns without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or negative consequences. In the context of OHS, it is the condition that allows workers to report hazards, challenge unsafe practices, and contribute

to problem-solving openly.

Without psychological safety, worker voice is constrained.

With it, participation becomes a powerful driver of risk identification and control.

This is particularly important for hazards that are not immediately visible or that develop over time. Workers are often the first to notice subtle changes in conditions, emerging patterns of strain, or workarounds that introduce new risks. If they feel safe to communicate these observations, organizations gain access to early warning signals that can prevent incidents.

If they do not, those signals are lost.

The Role of JHSCs as a Translation Mechanism

Joint Health and Safety Committees are uniquely positioned to act as a bridge between worker experience and organizational decision-making.

They translate frontline observations into structured recommendations, and they provide a forum where those recommendations can be evaluated and acted upon. When functioning effectively, JHSCs do more than fulfill regulatory requirements. They enhance the organization’s ability to understand and manage risk.

But this translation role depends on the quality of input.

If worker voice is limited, the committee’s output will be limited as well. Discussions may focus on minor issues or surface-level concerns, while more significant risks remain unaddressed. Recommendations may be reactive rather than proactive, addressing incidents after they occur rather than preventing them.

For JHSCs to be effective, they need access to unfiltered, accurate information about how work is actually performed.

Where Participation Systems Commonly Break Down

There are several points in the system where worker participation can degrade.

One of the most common is at the supervisor level. Supervisors act as the immediate interface between workers and the organization, and their response to concerns has a significant impact on whether workers choose to speak up in the future. If concerns are dismissed, minimized, or not followed up on, trust erodes quickly.

Another point of failure is in the response to recommendations. When committees identify issues and propose solutions, the organization’s response sends a clear signal about the value placed on worker input. Delayed action, lack of feedback, or superficial responses can undermine participation, even if the formal process is followed.

Finally, participation can break down when it is disconnected from decision-making. If committees are not involved in planning changes to work processes, equipment, or staffing, their ability to influence risk is limited.

Reframing Worker Participation as a System Control

To fully leverage worker participation, it needs to be understood not just as a right, but as a control mechanism.

In this sense, worker voice functions similarly to other controls in the hierarchy of hazard management. It provides a means of identifying risks that may not be captured through formal assessments. It supports the verification of controls

by providing feedback on their effectiveness in practice. And it contributes to continuous improvement by highlighting opportunities for change.

When viewed this way, the effectiveness of worker participation becomes a matter of system performance.

Are workers providing timely, accurate information about risk?
Is that information being integrated into decision-making?
Is the system responding in a way that reinforces participation?

These are the questions that determine whether the control is functioning.

Building Conditions That Support Meaningful Participation

Creating effective worker participation requires intentional design.

It begins with leadership setting clear expectations that speaking up is both expected and valued. This needs to be reinforced through consistent action, particularly in how concerns are received and addressed.

Supervisors need to be trained not just in hazard recognition, but in how to respond to worker input in a way that builds trust. This includes listening actively, acknowledging concerns, and following through on commitments.

JHSCs need to be positioned as part of the decision-making process, not as an after-the-fact review body. Their insights should inform planning, not just respond to outcomes.

Finally, the organization needs to close the loop. Workers need to see that their input leads to action. This does not mean that every suggestion is implemented, but it does mean that responses are communicated clearly and respectfully.

What This Means for OHS Leaders

For OHS leaders, strengthening worker participation requires a broader perspective.

It is not enough to ensure that committees are in place and meeting regularly. The focus needs to shift to how effectively those committees are functioning, and what conditions are influencing their performance.

This involves assessing not just compliance, but culture.

Are workers comfortable raising concerns?
Do supervisors support open communication?
Are committee recommendations acted upon in a timely manner?

Addressing these questions requires collaboration across the organization, particularly with operations and leadership.

Final Thoughts

Worker participation is one of the most powerful tools in the OHS system. But like any tool, its effectiveness depends on how it is used and the conditions in which it operates.

When supported by psychological safety, JHSCs and worker representatives can provide insight that no audit or assessment can replicate. They can surface risks early, validate controls, and drive continuous improvement. Without it, participation becomes a formality. And the system loses one of its most important lines of defense.