



ASSE's 100th Anniversary Essay Contest Winning Entry

TWO PAPER CUPS WITH A STRING

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When I contemplated the largest challenge facing our profession, I considered broad topics, such as what motivates employees to work safely or how to prevent back injuries.

Then I realized that even if all employees worldwide would wear their personal protective equipment as needed for just 1 hour, it would be an unprecedented achievement. This event would be legendary, and stories about this feat would be passed from one generation of safety professionals to the next for decades.

But to me, the biggest challenge was obvious, and much simpler to solve. It revolves around the issue that safety professionals do not communicate clearly, and allow confusion and crossed wires to occur. We rely too heavily on technology, and need to refocus on improving our communication skills in order to strengthen our relationships so we can better relate to and protect clients, coworkers and colleagues.

My workplace is not exotic or adventurous, since it is a traditional office environment. When I go to work each day, I wear a key card to gain access into the building, dress casually on Fridays and discuss the previous night's television shows.

But my department's concern for clients and their safety remains a priority. This unifying fact allows me to discuss what I feel is the largest challenge in a way to which all safety professionals can relate.

Consider these examples of crossed wires. When the risk management staff holds a department meeting, we gather in a large conference room. However, some of my coworkers are not always able to follow the conversation since others are speaking in the "foreign language" of safety acronyms. If my entire department would stop speaking this way, new or less-experienced employees would gain the full benefit from these meetings. In addition, other coworkers would have a better understanding of our department.

Another example revolves around snowy winter mornings that cause the office to close or prompt management to delay opening. Through technology, supervisors need not rely on a series of frantic telephone calls; instead, they use technology to inform the staff about what the plan. When a timely decision is not made and the announcement comes too late, my coworkers and I will head out on slippery roads too soon, instead of taking the time to properly dig out and wait for the roads to be safely cleared before heading to work.

When teaching a defensive driving class, I heard another story about a common misunderstanding involving technology from a police officer. Apparently, many drivers, especially older drivers, have become overly reliant on their directional devices and follow them unquestioningly. The officer stated that some motorists have put themselves in immediate danger by "taking the next right or left," as instructed and have ended up turning their vehicles onto railroad tracks, where they must await rescue.

At a friend's workplace, while interviewing a candidate who lived some distance away using new technology, a potential employee was asked by a top executive of the firm, "Tell me something I don't know about you." Mistakenly, the applicant replied, "I could drink all of my coworkers under the table at my last job." This statement illustrates how an improved understanding of communication could only benefit some new safety professionals.

This same workplace also had an annual meeting that was recorded. All employees were asked by the chief executive officer to rate the firm, and they raised their hands as different letter grades were mentioned. Some employees raised their hands for the poorest letter grades, leaving us to wonder, "How could these employees not understand that this recording could be viewed for years to come and their responses could directly impact their future?"

Frequently, departments need to work more directly together. If the risk management staff books an event for clients, we must remember to invite coworkers who would like to participate. Other times, the client receives the latest safety newsletter from our firm before staff does. Nothing is more annoying than when a client knows more than you do.

Another constant workplace communication trap is the “black hole” of the conference call. Have you ever experienced it? This vacuum-like event can be defined as the time you spend on a call, when no one is listening or can make a decision. Similar problems often occur when a large group repeatedly tries to schedule an event by e-mail, resulting in a never-ending string of messages, with no actual plan or date being chosen.

As you would assume, a meeting conducted in person is the best method to communicate effectively. A face-to-face meeting is not always possible, but is the most reliable to ensure that important information is not lost, especially if the meeting involves:

- observing safety concerns;
- following subtle clues, such as the speaker’s tone of voice or body language;
- brainstorming a complicated problem.

Since proper communication is the key when it comes to dealings in the workplace, here are some tips:

- Do not speak or write using acronyms.
- When you attend a meeting, sit with people you have not met before to network.
- Answer all the questions in each e-mail when responding to the sender.
- Make time to call and speak to a coworkers or client each day to stay more connected.
- At the end of a conference call, address each person individually to summarize all action items and see whether any questions remain.
- If you receive a task by e-mail, always reply to the sender when the task is completed.
- If you do not understand an e-mail, fax or text message, make the effort to pick up the telephone or speak to the person directly.
- After a meeting, prepare minutes and highlight the action items for each participant.

In conclusion, take the time to consider what communication challenges face your workplace and how they can be overcome. After all preventing global warming and protecting the earth are certainly larger challenges, but this problem reduces the effectiveness of all safety professionals.