

# INJURIES HURT: ARE YOU TALKING TOO MUCH ABOUT SAFETY?

By Carl and Deb Potter

Many company leaders and managers wonder, “Are we talking about safety too much?” The answer: “No one but you knows.”

How much “safety talk” is too much? Before you answer that question, you need to realize that many employees and managers are overloaded with communications these days. So when it comes to talking about safety, you could be dealing with more of a social problem than a corporate communication issue.

## TALKING SAFETY

The fact is that the majority of company leaders want to talk about safety. Injuries are a concern for everyone: They are emotional triggers, and they hurt everyone in the organization and at home. Nobody wants to see another person hurt, and nobody wants to get hurt.

Consider this question: How can you talk about safety in such a way that your employees don’t get sick of hearing about it and therefore stop listening?

Here’s the answer: Stick to developing, maintaining, and improving the safety process.

This is a simple answer for a complex issue, but consider what it means to focus on the process rather than on the emotions.

## THE EMOTIONS OF SAFETY

Too often, people view and deal with safety in an emotional way. Management gets frustrated when injuries occur and eventually they come out swinging “the safety hammer”. Pressure mounts and the managers step up their discipline (or cor-

rective action).

Recently, a safety director for a large company described a situation where an



Use the following three steps to guide your workers and leaders to discuss the “best practices” with regard to hazard control:

1. Have every work team (usually no more than 20 people) meet and facilitate a session by asking this question: What hazards does our team face each day that can cause injury to people and damage to equipment?

Then list each hazard on the far left side of flip chart paper. Your work team could easily fill up more than a dozen sheets.

2. Next, ask the team: What rules and safe work practices do we use to prevent injury to people and damage to equipment? (If you have a company safety book, use it for a resource.)

Write the responses next to each hazard on the list. Make sure everyone participates and understands the controls.

3. Finally, ask the team: Which of these controls can I place a check next to that we will always do? Most of the time the response will be... All of them!

employee was fatally injured and two others experienced serious injuries. For years the safety director had tried to get management’s attention about needed

improvements, but without success. Now everyone in the company seems to be a safety expert; every executive has the answer — and everyone has a different solution.

When this kind of situation emerges, everything becomes a mess. Finger pointing abounds, and the employees choose sides: either the problem is technical or it’s the people. Employees often begin to be fearful of retribution and decide not to report incidents or injuries. Should this scenario ever occur in your company, you need to diffuse the situation by focusing on the safety process.

## THE SAFETY PROCESS

In order to maintain safety at a level that prevents injuries, you first have to work on dealing with the emotional issues so the focus is on good decision-making. Realize that safety is both art and science and needs to be treated as such. The “art” is about dealing with people — establishing accountabilities, holding people responsible, and building trust. The “science” of safety is about dealing with behavioral and technical processes. Hazard control is an example of a process that includes both behavioral and technical aspects.

The technical process of safety involves identifying the hazard, abating or controlling it, engineering so it no longer exists, or changing work processes to include the use of protective or personal protective equipment.

When a hazard control has been established, practiced, and proven over time, workers and leaders accept it as normal, and it becomes “common sense” safety.

Sometimes acceptance of a new rule or work practice seems to take a while. And often, people don’t even understand their own resistance to the process.

### THE MILLION DOLLAR QUESTION

Bob, a safety committee chairperson, works in an industry where workers are required to wear protective personal equipment (PPE). When people don't wear the appropriate PPE, the results can be devastating because workers are exposed to the hazards of high-voltage electricity. As Bob explains: "We had someone get hurt last month because he wasn't wearing sleeves with his high-voltage rubber gloves. We all know that it's a good work practice to wear the sleeves, so why doesn't everyone just do it? Why don't they get it?"

"Why don't workers get it?" That's the \$1,000,000 question. Experience shows that acceptance of new rules, regulations, and work practices happens faster when workers are engaged in the process of determining the appropriate PPE for the hazards of their job.

### THROW IT ON THE WALL TO SEE WHAT STICKS

They key, therefore, is to get employees involved. Think about it... What would happen if workers in your organization listed the hazards they face every day, and then identified and quickly adopted a solution without emotion? An organization's ability to function without emotion and make correct decisions depends on the availability of internal leadership.

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3. Finally, ask the team: Which of these controls can I place a check next to that we will always do? Most of the time the response will be... All of them!

Discuss this last question at length with the team and confirm that they understand that always using these controls will provide a 99.9% probability that nobody gets hurt.

### TAKE ACTION FOR A SAFE WORKPLACE

Sure, some people may think your company talks about safety too much, and maybe they're right. Yet safety is an important topic that needs to be discussed.

Consider how you can get everyone involved in the discussion and how you can encourage them to take action to ensure that nobody gets hurt. When you do, you're likely to find the answer to that \$1,000,000 question.

*Carl Potter, CSP, CMC and Deb Potter, PhD, CMC work with organizations that want to create an environment where nobody gets hurt. As advocates of a zero-injury workplace, they are safety speakers, authors, and consultants to industry. For information about their programs and products, see [www.potterandassociates.com](http://www.potterandassociates.com)*



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