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Safety in the workplace and the role of the internal communicator

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This paper describes the role of the internal communicator in the promotion of safety in the workplace and provides recommendations for effective communication strategies in this area. The authors conducted structured interviews with internal communicators and environmental, health, and safety professionals working in large corporations in the United States. Using a grounded theory methodology, common themes were identified and practical recommendations for internal communicators were generated. The analysis of the interview data yielded five themes which describe an appropriate role of the internal communicator with respect to safety communication: (a) engagement with safety personnel, (b) engagement with management, (c) engagement with workers, (d) the need for collaboration, and (e) the value of traditional communication technologies.

Keywords

*health and safety at work | occupational injury and illness |
communications strategy | internal communications | grounded theory methodology |
US corporate environment*

Introduction

The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) reported that 4,383 fatal occupational injuries and almost 3 million nonfatal injuries and illnesses (2,976,400) occurred in the United States in 2012. Leigh (2011) estimates that the total national economic costs of occupational injury and illnesses among civilians in the United States for 2007 were approximately \$250 billion. Compared to the creation of a colorful newsletter or the roll-out of a new Intranet system, communicating messages about safety protocols may seem rather mundane. However, as is made clear by the occupational injury statistics cited above, the success or failure of safety communication practices is measured not only in terms of the financial bottom line, but also in terms of life and death. A poor safety record also generates bad publicity and negatively affects a company's reputation. Increasingly, pressure to operate in a safe and environmentally sound manner is coming from customers and communities who are also looking more closely at the manufacturing facilities in their midst. A poor reputation for safety can negatively affect permit applications for such activities as plant expansions. The potential impact of effective safety communication strategies for the organization is not to be underestimated.

Given the high personal, social, and financial stakes associated with workplace safety, it would be expected that the role of an organization's communication function with respect to safety would be extensively reviewed in the management and corporate communication literature. This is not the case. Mullen (2004) notes that less than 1% of organizational research has focused on issues concerning occupational health and safety (see also Barling, Loughline, and Kelloway, 2002) and it is only recently that communication issues in the area of safety have been addressed by communication scholars and researchers (see Real, 2008; Zoller, 2003, 2004). Similarly, Michael, Guo, Wiedenbeck, and Ray (2006) report that although substantial research has focused on leader/subordinate communication in the workplace, insufficient attention has been given to considering this relationship in terms of workplace safety (see also Hoffman and Morgeson, 1999). This paper addresses this dearth of research on the relationship of communication and safety by examining the role of the internal communicator in meeting the challenge of creating and maintaining a safe work environment.

The job of the internal communicator within the modern corporation embraces many diverse functions (e.g., Holtz, 2003; Quirke, 2002; Smith and Mounter, 2005). On the tactical level, the internal communicator disseminates information to employees, such as benefits information. On the strategic level, the internal communicator has a key role in articulating the mission, vision, and values of the organization for employee consumption, as well as encouraging productivity, maintaining employee morale, and creating and maintaining a positive corporate culture. It is our contention that the creation of a positive safety culture should also fall under this purview. It should be the task of the internal communicator to articulate and disseminate values associated with safety through the strategic deployment of messages.

Our thesis is that the value of safety communication lies in the creation and maintenance of *employee engagement* on health and safety issues. Engagement means more than simply circulating safety information on colorful posters or presenting standardized PowerPoint presentations or DVDs. The presentation of safety information by itself will have little or no significant impact on the well-being of employees. Employee engagement in issues of safety is about getting management and employees actively involved with everyday work place practice. This paper will address the role the internal communication professional must play in the creation, acceptance, and maintenance of employee engagement with regard to the issue of safety.

The safety paradox: The challenge for the internal communicator

The crux of the challenge for the internal communicator in the area of safety is something that might be called the *safety paradox*. It would seem at first blush that getting employees to work safely would be an easy task because the internal communicator is advocating behaviours that are in the employee's self-interests. After all, no one wants to get hurt, or perhaps worse. Plus there are considerable direct cost-savings to businesses when workers stay whole and healthy. These include lower workers' compensation insurance costs, reduced medical expenditures, smaller expenditures for return-to-work programmes, fewer faulty products, lower costs for job accommodations for injured workers, and less money spent for overtime benefits (see Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2014). Demonstrated attention to safety and health also results in the reduction of indirect costs due to increased productivity and morale, better labour/management relations, and reduced turnover.

On the negative side, in addition to the direct costs incurred to the company when employees are unable to physically work because of injury, there are also the hidden costs associated with unsafe practices (Oxenburgh and Marlow, 2005). Workers are unable to function efficiently because of poorly designed equipment. Badly designed work procedures result in lower productivity. Poor working conditions caused by environmental hazards such as bad lighting, dust, or fumes contribute to absenteeism, avoidance of undesirable work areas, and greater rates of staff turnover.

However, despite these arguments for the importance of safety, Zohar and Luria (2003) have noted that engaging employees on issues of safety poses a significant challenge to management and, by extension, to the internal communication function. Working safely constitutes an odd kind of paradox. Following safety procedures, such as wearing special equipment, ensuring the workplace is clean and organized, or having a *work-buddy*, takes time and effort and the benefits are not readily apparent. Injuries are events that attract attention and motivate behaviour change. Safe behaviour can only result in non-events, however; i.e., the avoidance of low-probability incidents. When safety behaviour is successful, nothing happens. When nothing happens for weeks, months and years, employees can feel that perhaps all these complex routines are not really worth it.

Employees can feel pulled in two different directions by the seemingly contradictory messages of *working safely versus working efficiently*. The idea of *working safely* often means working at a slower pace, putting in extra effort, or enduring the personal discomfort of wearing safety equipment. Such practices do not necessarily enhance work productivity, and employees may be tempted to take safety short cuts in order to complete their tasks more quickly which, in turn, can lead to immediate tangible financial benefits for both the employee and the company. In terms of unsafe behaviour, Mullen (2004) notes that, '*workers who compare negative aspects (risk of being injured) to positive aspects (good wages, benefits, etc.) tend to be more likely to adopt unsafe practices if the costs are perceived to be less than the beneficial outcomes*' (p.276).

Faced with a mindset like this, presenting employees with information on *how to work safely* will have little or no impact on behavior since information alone will not overcome the underlying perception of risk and the perceived benefits of working unsafely. That is why employee communication has to be more than giving information to workers. It has to be about engaging employees in such a way as to persuade them to maintain safe practices even if those practices seem more inefficient for the worker. How might internal communication address what we have labeled the safety paradox? What can the internal communicator do?

Method

Subjects: Structured interviews were conducted with 16 internal communicators and environmental, health, and safety professionals working in large corporations in the United States. The 16 respondents were in mid-level management positions or higher with no less than 12 years of experience. Most of the respondents had 20 years of professional experience or more. One interviewee worked for a consulting firm, another worked for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the remaining 14 worked for national and international corporations with at least 1,000 employees (most had 5,000 employees or more and the largest company employed 90,000 employees). Five of the interviewees worked in the safety, industrial hygiene, and environmental function of their company, one interviewee was a Human Resources professional with responsibility for workplace safety, and five interviewees worked in the corporate communication function. This mix of professional experience was selected deliberately to generate a picture of safety communication from a variety of perspectives.

The 14 interviewees working in corporate communications were happy to discuss safety communication at their workplace, but only on the condition that their names and the names of their corporations remained anonymous. Some were concerned with the way their company might be depicted to the general public. Others were concerned about possible litigation related to safety issues in the workplace. One corporate communication professional that was approached as a potential interviewee refused to participate in the study because of a litigation issue being faced by his company at the time. Even if interviewees had been willing to give their names, in order to identify corporations and their employees, the authors would have been required to submit the completed manuscript to the corporations' legal departments for a review and approval process that would likely include others within the corporation. Interviewee confidentiality was therefore necessary to ensure that the interviewees felt free to speak openly about their experiences. The sample of interviewees has limitations because, while many of these professionals work for global companies, all 16 respondents were from the United States and their perspectives were largely American.

Interview protocol: The researchers used a structured interview format to collect data from the interviewees. As Bailey (2007) explains, *'the researcher conducting a structured interview asks, in specific order, precise questions of interest to him or her'* (p.98). During a structured interview, the interviewer controls the content, order, and pace of the questions, and works to keep the respondent on track. As Bailey (2007) points out, *'structured interviews are particularly useful for comparing answers from different groups of respondents'* (p.99). In this case, a common set of questions was asked to respondents from a range of different job descriptions and professional backgrounds. Having a common set of questions allowed the researchers to compare and contrast responses.

The interview questions were generated from a close reading of Stewart's (2002) *Managing for world class safety* combined with the work experience of the second author. An initial list of questions was drafted which included the areas of tactics, current practices, the relationship of the corporate communicator to the safety function, the role of management and leadership, recommended best practices, how approaches to safety communication has changed over time, and the potential impact of corporate communications on the workplace safety culture. These questions were further refined and follow-up questions identified after initial interviews were conducted with Alison Davis, a communication consultant, and Michael Yarnell, an OSHA officer stationed in New Jersey. The final interview protocol is included as Appendix A.

Procedure: The interviews were conducted from November 14, 2006 – April 18, 2008. Seven interviews were conducted face-to-face and nine interviews were conducted by telephone. Extensive handwritten notes were taken. The interviews were not audio-recorded. The interviews lasted from 30 – 60 minutes.

Analysis of interview data

The 16 interviews generated over 50 pages of interview transcripts. Analysis of the transcripts was based in a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2002; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) which identified emerging themes and patterns within the transcript data. Themes were defined as topics that reoccurred across responses from different interviewees (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). An initial list of themes was generated and shared with the 16 interviewees. All of the interviewees agreed that the emergent themes were accurate and offered feedback for minor changes. In the analysis that follows, quotes from the interviewees are used to establish and illustrate the identified themes.

Results

Theme one: Communicating with safety personnel: The interviewees agreed that a key domain of the internal communicator is to render intelligible the laws and standards for safety mandated by the federal government. Workplace safety is the domain of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, signed into law on December 29, 1970, by President Richard M. Nixon, and overseen by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Part of OSHA's mission is setting and enforcing safety standards. It would seem that a workplace would be considered safe when it follows OSHA standards and guidelines. Unfortunately, the situation is not that simple. OSHA standards have to be translated into a form the manager and the worker can understand and use in their daily work lives, as noted in these remarks by the Hon. Charlie Norwood, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Workforce Protections, in 2005:

"I've heard employers say many times that . . . OSHA regulations are too complex and difficult to understand. Clearing up this regulatory jungle has been one of my top priorities since coming to Congress in 1995, and continues to be so today. I believe a regulatory jungle is an apt description for the myriad of OSHA rules, regulations, gigantic documents, and interpretive letters that employers must come to understand". (United States Senate, 2005, p.1).

A Senior Consultant on Casualty Risk Control agrees that the translation of regulations into every day work practice is a concern, and that regulation is not confined to the federal level: *"The Regulatory Jungle does not include only OSHA, but also federal, state and local – and even industry – regulatory mandates. In some locations, the local regulatory mandates may be more stringent than the OSHA mandates, and be better or more aggressively enforced."*

All interviewees agreed that the translation of Norwood's *jungle* of regulations, rules, and standards into meaningful work practices in the work environment is a *communication* problem and also that communicating creatively about safety is unique amongst internal communication activities because it is bound by regulations which mandate the safety information companies must communicate to its employees and the safety activities it must undertake. *"Content won't ever be the responsibility of corporate communications,"* acknowledges an Environmental, Health & Safety (EH&S) leader at a large chemicals manufacturer. *"While we might understand the complex information, we don't have such an easy time sharing it with people who aren't part of the EH&S profession."* The first priority of the internal communicator, then, is to engage with personnel directly involved with safety practices.

One problem identified by the interviewees is that the first instinct of an organization's safety officer to go it alone when creating and disseminating safety information. The Safety Manager of a small chemical company remarked, *"I can find and download all the safety-related information I need from the Internet. If I need a poster, there are fee-based sites that let me order or download exactly what I need. This is much easier and faster than trying to get help from corporate communications."* Similarly, a Safety Leader at a large energy company stated that *"corporate communications does not support our safety communications and I never thought to ask them for help."* Some interviewees noted that few plants are large enough to support an on-site communications professional. Usually the human resources representative, the plant manager's administrative assistant, or member of a specific function, such as safety, takes responsibility for local communications.

Changing this situation requires proactive outreach from the corporate communication function to the personnel in charge of safety communications. The interviewees agreed that the internal communicator has to take the initiative for expanding her network to include safety professionals, as well as contacts from the Risk Management, Legal, and Human Resources Departments. All of these departments have a stake in the safety of the employee population but it is the responsibility of the Communications Department to bring these stakeholders together.

Engaging with the community of safety professionals is essential because the internal communicator will be unable to effectively translate foreign terminology and legalese into layman's terms until they are able to understand it themselves. One interviewee noted that obtaining this Rosetta Stone begins with the internal communicator gaining a working knowledge of how the EH&S department functions and understanding the department's hierarchy, including who is in a corporate office and what types of EH&S employees work in the sites. The next step for the internal communicator is to get to know the EH&S people personally. Every organization has unique complexity: multiple locations, different types of employees at each location, different types of plants with different types of procedures, different functions, and different shifts. It is imperative that the internal communicator leave the corporate office and visits EH&S personnel in the plants they serve and continues to engage in regular dialogue.

Theme two: Engaging with management: A second theme that emerged from the interview data was the role of the internal communicator in the engagement of management in safety issues. It falls to the internal communicator to make management aware of the importance of their role in promoting the value of safety in the workplace. Interviewees agreed that it is necessary for managers to go beyond simply issuing safety-related memos, and numerous interviewees stated that Management must become actively and even physically involved in health and safety matters. A Senior Safety and Industrial Hygiene Manager stated the issue as follows: *"The problem with folks from Corporate – and I've worked in Corporate during my career – is that they have no idea what it is like to work at a plant site. They make demands on us that are difficult to carry out in the real world."* Another interviewee said that management commitment to safety can be communicated by managers demonstrating the safety behaviors required of the workers, including something as simple as holding on to a hand rail when walking down the stairs. Managers should own personal protective equipment such as safety glasses and steel-toe safety shoes. And they need to know what to look for in a plant environment, such as proper lock-out/tag-out and fire extinguishers placement and maintenance.

Interviewees noted that internal communicators can ensure that safety posters hang not just in the plant environment but in the management offices as well. While an office environment is less hazardous by nature, leaders who control budgets must be constantly reminded that the safety of its workers is their responsibility. Communicators can also plan meetings at the corporate office that include or focus on safety. While such presentations may seem to have less relevance than in a plant environment, they will help cascade safety thinking down through the organization. Internal communicators should encourage leaders to visit plants, hold skip-level meetings at plants, begin and end all meetings with a safety message, and work safety into written messages. Interviewees recommended that internal communicators also provide local managers with safety communication tool kits including DVDs, handouts, or posters and by providing them with talking points so managers always have well-crafted safety messages on hand in any situation.

Theme three: Engaging with workers through appropriate language: Communicators know that words are powerful and they can serve their enterprise by determining which terms and phrases to use in safety discussions and materials. For example, a Vice President of Corporate Communications at a specialty materials business warns: *“Be careful not to stress the notion of ‘zero injuries.’ We do not want to punish people who have suffered an injury. Focusing on ‘zero’ could drive injuries underground. Rather than report the incident so that we can correct the problem, the employee creates a cover-up, saying the injury happened at home. Instead, focus the safety message on keeping everyone safe, looking out for each other and taking responsibility for behaving safely ourselves.”*

In other words, the message should be about caring about people – not caring about metrics. A communicator at a corporation providing an array of services to residential and commercial customers advises: *“Look at safety from the positive. If you say, ‘I don’t want you to get hurt,’ you are approaching from the negative. We say, ‘I want you to stay safe.’”* Language is also important in terms of how a company labels what occurred. Stewart (2002) notes that, *‘safe companies do not use the term ‘accident’, with its connotation of an uncontrollable event. Instead, they refer to injuries and incidents’* (p.70). The interviewees offered the following examples of positive safety messages:

- We can prevent all injuries.
- We care about your safety. We want you to be able to return to your family at the end of your shift in the same shape as when you arrived.
- Safety is compatible with excellence in other areas of the business, including quality, productivity and profitability.
- Safety is not a priority, it is a value. Our priorities may change but our values do not.
- In any case of conflict between safety and other objectives, safety always comes first.
- It is not enough to perform your job: have to perform your job safely.

A number of interviewees recommended that the internal communicator should also have a strategy for communicating safety statistics and the disclosure of recordable incidents. Numbers by themselves are not particularly relevant to the average employee. To help employees understand the meaning behind the numbers, internal communicators can work with the safety staff to help them provide more meaningful information in terms of the impact of injuries on human beings. To translate numbers into learning opportunities, interviewees suggested that communicators ask their safety colleagues such questions as:

- What types of injuries occurred? How many of these injuries occurred? What are we doing to prevent them from happening again?
- What must employees do to help the company achieve its safety goal?
- What hazards should employees look out for, based on these results? What action should they take to eliminate these hazards?
- What injury prevention activities has the company recently undertaken and what impact did these actions have on our safety results?
- How can we connect these results with our safety targets and the company’s overall performance goals?

The goal is not to make employees aware of a number but to provide them with information so they know how to avoid injuries to themselves or those around them. A generic *stay safe* discussion is not as helpful as providing specifics and examples. Communicators can work with safety staffs to develop monthly or quarterly themes based on what types of injuries are most prevalent. The team can tie posters, articles and discussions of these themes to seasons, such as avoiding slips on snow and ice; to specific events, such as National Safety Month™ for members of the National Safety Council; or to specific body areas, such as avoiding hand injuries. Focusing on a specific message for each period keeps safety discussions fresh and interesting.

Theme four: The need for collaboration: The interviewees agreed that all employees of an organization must be involved in any effective safety program. While safety and health is the employer's responsibility, the workers must be able to anticipate or recognize hazards and collaborate with their employer to implement controls. Employee engagement is the foundation of a local safety culture. To nurture such cultures, internal communicators need to do more than provide information. They have to provide opportunities for engagement in order to create connections between management and employees. For many of the interviewees, this is the key relationship in the creation and maintenance of the safety value in an organization. An EH&S leader at a large chemicals manufacturer notes: *"Corporate Communications would add value by helping my function explain the value of the safety investment to top management. My profession tends to get bogged down in a lot of nitty-gritty details and that is not what top management wants to see. They just want to know the bottom line and we need help with showing how environmental and safety stewardship isn't a cost – it actually saves the company money."* This leader would also like assistance with accessing, and preparing, the management chain so that these leaders will be visible in championing safety, noting that *"it cannot be on the shoulders of safety people."*

With more than seven million workplaces in the U.S., OSHA will never have the resources to use inspection as the means of fulfilling the agency's mandate to protect employee safety and health. Thus, OSHA is putting a greater emphasis on Voluntary Protection Programs (VPP), in which management, labour and OSHA establish cooperative relationships at workplaces that have implemented a comprehensive safety and health management system. A Compliance Assistance Specialist at OSHA remarks that: *"The hallmarks of VPP are management commitment and employee involvement, which is why these factors represent 40 percent of a VPP evaluation."* How does OSHA feel about the role of management in workforce safety? The OSHA official stated that, *"There is no way on the planet Earth that OSHA will certify an establishment in VPP unless management demonstrates their commitment to safety through direct involvement with employees."* Approval into VPP is OSHA's official recognition of the outstanding efforts of employers and employees who have achieved exemplary occupational safety and health. The OSHA official continued: *"Engaging the employee in safety and health can only be partially accomplished by the communicator. Where the rubber actually meets the road is when the employee physically accompanies a walk-around inspection team or witnesses a safety problem he or she pointed out being corrected. That is my definition of 'engagement.' But the skills and actions of a communicator can go a long way toward making that involvement real."*

Theme five: The value of traditional communication strategies: Internal communicators seek to influence others through many information channels. They can help to determine when, where, and how often to expose employees to safety messages. Some interviewees suggested that developing a robust intranet site with a section dedicated to safety-related resources is an obvious project for communications support. Here employees can find information about the company's objectives, performance, and activities. Locations can share documentation and best practices. Articles with safety themes can be cross-referenced with links to additional resources.

Interviewees also reported that technology is useful to engage employees who tend to have office space, such as plant managers, safety professionals, and human resources representatives. Just about everyone with access to a computer relies on email or instant messaging and newer engagement technologies (web conferencing, web casting, podcasting, blogs and wikis) are gaining ground. Three interviewees suggested the innovative idea of using a blog to update employees on safety information as it becomes available. A blog also has the capacity to receive employee feedback.

There is a clear trend in corporate communications in general away from print and toward pixels. Corporate management is moving towards electronic rather than print newsletters to save money, using the justification that the Intranet provides an archive of this information. As some interviewees pointed out, however, while this practice may reduce costs and clutter in an office environment, it is likely to reduce the information to a large constituency of employees who work in the plant

environment. If there are computers in the plant, employees must protect them from the harsh often dusty manufacturing environment, which at minimum means enclosing them in plastic and keeping them away from machinery. Having computers located away from equipment also means having them being away from employees. *“The vast majority of our communications are disseminated via the Intranet,”* says a Manager of Corporate Communications at a large chemicals manufacturer. *“The problem is that a lot of plant employees do not have access to a computer at work. Even where there are kiosks, we cannot really expect that people will use them during their breaks, or before or after their shifts.”* Distributing materials with a *“please post for those without Intranet access”* message will only do a modicum of good and most probably will be ignored.

Interviewees pointed out that visual communications have particular value in a plant environment. These can include posters, signs, bulletin boards, calendars, hardhat stickers, table tents in the cafeteria or break room, pictograms (like IKEA ‘*how to assemble*’ instructions), and interactive PowerPoint presentations that individuals can click through on a computer. Plant-level supervisors also appreciate tools like specific Questions & Answers (Q&As), with answers. Alison Davis notes that *“communicators often think Q&As are the dumbest tools in the world. But supervisors have to be prepared to answer questions. Plant managers are terrified of not being able to answer a question. If you do a great Q&As document that gives the local supervisors answers to the horrible questions they are going to get, then they feel all set.”* A list of Q&As is an engagement tool if the supervisor uses it to foster dialogue. Communicators can also make it easier for local supervisors to disseminate routine safety information by providing brief topic-specific modules. Such techniques as graphics, talking points, an ‘*elevator speech*,’ Q&As, and the one-pager on a single topic will help people give employees in the manufacturing environment interesting, relevant information that also furthers the key messages and goals of the corporation.

The interviewees agreed that the use of PowerPoint in a plant level situation may not be particularly useful since many interactions and meetings are informal and held standing up. Some interviewees noted that supervisors do not want to take people off the line for longer than they must or ‘*waste time*’ talking. Workers are concerned with reaching their production goals. Corporate managers spend much of their time in meetings so they may not realize this. Print information is the preferred communication medium in this setting since a shift supervisor can hold up a visual, post it or pass it around. Handouts are also a good option, but a discussion with the shift supervisor will help to determine the best method for distribution.

Publishing print versions of internal articles and memos continues to have value because it assists with awareness, employee recognition, the sharing of best practices and articulating management’s support for a safe workplace. Because safety communications cannot neglect any group of employees, including those without regular computer access, communications practitioners should collaborate with their superiors to make the case that manufacturing is an environment where online communication is limited in its usefulness.

Discussion

This paper has identified a number of key areas where the internal communicator has a critical role to play. These are engaging with the key constituencies of: (a) safety personnel, (b) management, and (c) employees, (d) encouraging collaboration among different levels of the organization, and (e) recognizing the importance of traditional channels of communication. Our interviewees agreed with the statement that all safety communication practices should work towards the articulation of safety as a central *value* of the organization. Safety should not be perceived as a function a company follows in a passive and reactive way simply because it is required by law. A company's commitment to safety must be clear, well understood and visible in all of its actions. This value should include an organizational belief that the company can avoid or prevent all injuries. In any case of conflict between safety and other objectives, employees should know they must put safety first.

Like most functions within today's lean corporate environments, communication departments tend to be small, with tight budgets, many internal clients, and many areas of responsibility. Why would they seek out another customer, particularly one that operates in such a complex and non-glamorous part of the business? Lester Ifill Jr., a Senior Consultant on Casualty Risk Control, addressed this question as follows: *"If a company can reduce the frequency of injuries, statistically speaking – and insurance professionals use data and subjective information (e.g. safety programs in place and operative), to make their decisions – they reduce the severity of the injuries suffered, which saves dollars on workers' compensation and liability insurance. Those dollars go right to the bottom line. So, companies are looking at their safety record and asking: 'What can I do to improve my experience?'"*

Safety is about caring but it is also about profitability and productivity. According to Stewart (2002): 'The safe companies say they give first priority to safety, but managers in companies with mediocre safety say the same thing' (p.9). Saying 'stay safe' is important, but statements aren't enough to change unsafe behaviors. Unless employees truly believe all injuries are preventable, they will not operate under this assumption. Internal communicators can help employees believe by offering guidance on good communication practices to the safety function. But the community of internal communicators needs help and support. The research literature investigating the application of communication techniques to health and safety issues is small. It is hoped that this article has identified areas where productive investigation by communication researchers can take place.

Ultimately, the key to successful safety communication is engagement, both of management and workers. *"Safety awareness is a never-ending process,"* says the EH&S leader at a large chemicals manufacturer. *"That's why I like to take a 'belt and suspenders' approach. We cannot approach safety from too many perspectives."* With the help of internal communicators, these perspectives will be clear, relevant, interesting, and engaging.

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Appendix A

Interview protocol

Why is communicating about safety challenging – and how can communicators help?

What is your over-arching safety message? How is it communicated?

What communication practices do Safety professionals at your organization currently use?

Is the Safety function an internal client of the Corporate Communications department?

In what ways are traditional employee communications tools and techniques effective for promoting safe behavior?

When does your organization communicate about safety? (After an injury? All the time?)

How do you discuss safety performance? (Is it part of overall company performance or does the organization focus on financial results, with safety as an afterthought?)

How have corporate communications practices changed in the last 20 years, particularly in the area of promoting safe work practices?

What is the role of top management in promoting safe behavior? (Are they fulfilling this role? How can the Corporate Communications department help?)

What can Corporate Communications professionals do to understand the safety needs of employees better?



VISTAS

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