

Toolbox Talks 2

029: Qualified vs. Unqualified

Discussion leader duties for this session:

Think of a few tasks that would be dangerous to an unqualified person and be prepared to explain these as examples.

What this Safety Talk covers:

What a “qualified” person is, and what this means to your safety.

Discussion notes:

Background

You will find definitions of “Qualified Personnel” in OSHA 191.399, NEC Article 100, NFPA 70b, NFPA 70E, and other standards. These definitions are similar, and they essentially require a combination of training and authorization to perform certain tasks or to work on certain equipment.

Two basic rules

- Don’t do work for which you aren’t *qualified*.
- Don’t assume you are qualified, based on your technical knowledge or how easy the work appears to be.

Signs you may be unqualified

- You have never done this kind of work before. No matter how simple the work seems, what you don’t know *can* hurt you or someone else.
- You aren’t familiar with the equipment *being used* to perform the work (especially notable for motorized equipment, such as lift trucks).
- You aren’t familiar with the equipment *being worked on*.
- You aren’t familiar with the process (applicable when working on a running installation, as opposed to new construction not yet started up).
- You don’t have specific training for this task.
- This work is very different from what you have been doing. For example, this is medium voltage work and you have been doing 480V work.

How to know if you are qualified

- You have the specific training for the equipment being used and being worked on.
- You have been specifically authorized by the company to use the specific equipment and perform the specific tasks involved in the work.

Best practices

- Assess any assignment and determine whether you are qualified to do it before accepting it. If you don’t think you are qualified, tell your foreman why.
- If you are in the middle of a job and discover you aren’t qualified to continue to the next step, stop. Discuss your concerns with your foreman.

Thought to keep in mind

There is no shame in recognizing your limits. But the consequences of exceeding them can be disastrous for your company and for you personally.

Review and discussion

1. What are the two basic rules regarding qualified vs. unqualified?
2. Why should the assumption be that you are unqualified, rather than the other way around? Can you think of an example where the wrong assumption could be disastrous? *[Note to presenter: Of course, common sense applies. You can use "not qualified" as a reason to tell your foreman you shouldn't be given a particular assignment. But you can't use it as an excuse not to perform an assigned task even though you know you actually do possess the training to do the task and this is a matter of splitting hairs. If you genuinely disagree with your foreman that you are qualified, the two of you need to find out what the qualifications are for performing the task. **Example of reason:** Your foreman wants you to use a lift truck to move a motor, and the owner says it's OK. But you don't have lift truck training. **Example of excuse:** The crew needs to pull MCM cable by hand, and you don't want to do the hard work. The cable is being used for MV distribution, and you say you aren't qualified to do MV work.]*
3. If you have never done a particular kind of work before, what is that a sign of?
4. What are some other signs that you might not be qualified to perform a given task or work on particular equipment?
5. How can you know when you are qualified?
6. What should you do before accepting an assignment?
7. What if you are working on an assignment and discover you aren't qualified to continue with it? What should you tell your foreman, and why?
8. Is there shame in recognizing your limits? What does recognizing your limits say about your confidence in the areas in which you are trained and competent? *[Note to presenter: People who are good at what they do have no need to prove themselves by attempting things they are not qualified to do.]*
9. Why does it not matter that a task you are not qualified for appears to be a no-brainer, could be figured out, or will take just a minute to do?
10. If you are sure you're not qualified to perform a task but your foreman assures you that you are, what should you do? *[Note to presenter: This discussion will touch on company policy. The foreman needs to make an accurate assessment, even if that means not being able to put that person on a job that needs to be done. The electrician will need to try to work out the disagreement with the foreman, and doing that may mean they both go to a higher authority. This kind of disagreement does come up, and sometimes it touches gray areas. The final decision needs to be focused on safety, although concerns of quality and cost also come into play. One way to approach this is to determine exactly what the qualifications are for that particular task and then determine what qualifications the worker actually has. The solution may be to shift assignments from the unqualified employee to a qualified one. If the issue comes up repeatedly, whether with the same employee or multiple employees, an assessment of the company's training program may be in order.]*

Participant's Signature and Date
