

Toolbox Talks 2

100: When Instructions Aren't Clear

Discussion leader duties for this session:

Think back through your work experience to an example of misunderstood instructions. Be prepared to talk about it.

What this Safety Talk covers:

This Safety Talk addresses unclear instructions and what to do about them.

Discussion notes:

Background

Construction sites are busy places with constantly changing conditions. You get instructions from many sources. These include drawings, equipment manuals, your foreman, and signs. Some of the most safety-sensitive instructions come from the people you're working with.

For example, you're taking current measurements. Your partner hollers from around the corner, "Don't close the breaker." What if you don't hear that first word "don't?"

All kinds of factors can contribute to miscommunication. These range from background noise to poor word choices.

What not to do

If instructions are unclear, *never* do any of the following:

- Go with what you think the other person "must" mean or probably means.
- Ignore the instructions. If the instruction is a warning, you can get someone killed.
- Pretend you understand, when you're not sure.

For verbal instructions

One problem with unclear instructions is you may actually think they were clear. You may think you heard correctly. Consider using the following practices, any time your safety is on the line:

- Avoid yelling across a distance. Not all words carry equally well.
- Listen carefully. It's human nature to anticipate what the other person will say. Sometimes we hear that instead of what they said.
- Repeat back what you heard. Then say it a different way. For example, "You said close the breaker. You want me to energize the circuit so it's at 480 volts, right?"
- Confirm the response. For example, "OK, I'm going to close the breaker so the system will become hot. That's what you want me to do now, right?"

Never assume the other person understood your instructions, either.

For written instructions

Sometimes, you may see vague wording or a conflict in written instructions. Don't guess or try to interpret. Contact the issuer of the document for a correction. If that isn't possible, contact your foreman.

Review and discussion

1. What are some sources of instructions?

2. If you're unsure of what was said, what's wrong with just taking your best guess at what the other person actually means?
3. If you don't understand, should you just ignore the instructions?
4. Is it better for others to think you understand or for you to actually understand? What if the other person gets annoyed with you for asking questions? For repeating things? *[Note to Presenter: When it comes to safety, the only dumb question is the one not asked. Repeating something back is a standard communication procedure.]*
5. Can you incorrectly think you understood? How can you avoid this problem?
6. Why should you avoid yelling across a distance? What are some better ways to communicate? *[Note to Presenter: Radios, cell phones, and a third person acting as message carrier or repeater can all prevent yelling through walls or across distances.]*
7. What's a listening problem that is basically human nature? What can we do to avoid getting the wrong message because of it?
8. Why is repeating back what you heard important? Why should you repeat back exactly what you heard, and then repeat it in a different way?
9. Why should you confirm the response to your repeating of the instructions?
10. If written instructions are unclear, conflicting, or confusing, what's the safe and efficient way to resolve the problem? *[Note to Presenter: While safety is the driving force behind clearing up unclear written instructions, efficiency is also a reason. It's not your job to have to decipher the drawings, installation notes, or other documentation. If it's not right, send it back. Keep your foreman informed.]*

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for handwriting practice. There are no margins, text, or other markings present.