

COMMUNICATION

The Importance of Transparency

By Justin Moloczniak

As a safety professional, you likely held some responsibility over the past several years in managing the pandemic, particularly in communication. While exhausting, my personal experience gave me opportunities to better understand how the type of communication I used could impact the perception of my audience on the receiving end.

I specifically remember communicating messages that built trust (e.g., “we want to protect you and your family”) and at the same time created uncertainty (e.g., “we do not know what the future looks like”). Unfortunately, I also remember times when the communication sent was ambiguous and lacked authenticity, which was detrimental. Interestingly, Petersen et al. (2021) conducted research in which transparency in communication about vaccinations (both good and bad) was found to have both a positive (trust) and negative (hesitation) effect on the public, but vague communication has a much deeper negative impact on trust. In an environment where information was (and still is) coming from all directions and can lead to distrust and skepticism, the importance of clear, consistent and unbiased communication is critical. Transparency is the tool I’ve relied on to communicate throughout the pandemic, and it has made all the difference.

Safety is synonymous with communication, as demonstrated by the more than 100 entries on communication in *Professional Safety* journal’s archive. But what is transparent communication? It is “the act of both good and bad information being shared upward, downward and laterally in a way that allows all to see the why behind the words” (Hutchison, 2020). As a safety professional, you need to effectively deliver both good and bad news within your safety practice; it certainly becomes easier if you can offer a why. Think about it in the context of explaining a safety intervention for a hazard that workers are unaware of (or have ignored) or communicating to your leadership group about an injury or illness that has occurred that will impact the organization. These are both situations in which being transparent in communication will lead to a better understanding from an audience.

So, how can you effectively communicate and be transparent? If you attended Safety 2022 in person, you may have caught John McBride’s session, “Perception: How It Impacts Your Leadership Success.” John shared an effective communication method by emphasizing the importance of

learning the languages of those with whom you are communicating (McBride, 2022). If the receiver cannot understand you (or, for that matter, you cannot understand them), your effort will be trivial. This may mean more preparation on your end as an effective transparent communicator, but whether you are speaking (in John’s terms) the language of operations, finance, human resources or the employee, your audience will better understand.

One of the game changers in the application of communication in safety is E. Scott Geller (2018), whose seven Cs for safety success are rooted in effective communication with employees. Moreover, Geller emphasizes that it is imperative to establish interpersonal communication—communication between individuals, which is foundational in a relationship. I recommend becoming familiar with the sequence of different types of communication that Geller references in his model, including relationship (a deeper understanding of the individual), possibility (communication focused on the future and potential), action (or direction to the individual), opportunity (communicating application or how and where can this be applied) and follow-up (check in on results). These types of communication are empowered by transparency. For example, you cannot expect to communicate an action without fully explaining why the action is important. The connection here is that interpersonal communication and how it is accomplished cannot be effectively established without trust, and trust is built by transparent communication.

Trusting relationships are developed by communication and create an environment of psychological safety, which is an incredibly effective way to not only run your safety program, but any organization as a whole. If you think about the concept of psychological safety—the ability to show and employ one’s authentic self without fear of negative consequences to

self-image, status or career—you can see how transparent communication not only creates the space for employees to feel psychologically safe, but also that it perpetuates the environment to practice it (Geller, 2022). A great exercise is to think about the transparent (or guarded) communicators in your life and workplace. How do you feel when communicating with them? Does it feel authentic, or are you left feeling unsure about the situation?

There is no denying that communication can be difficult. While transparent communication can help grow trust, build relationships and create psychological safety, it is not the be-all-end-all solution to communication. Improving your communication style is an individualistic journey and, as noted, may be best crafted for the audience you are speaking with. Reflect on your communication style, and if you find a lack of transparency, I encourage you to try it out. **PSJ**

References

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Justin Moloczniak, M.S., CSP, CHST, CRIS, is safety director for JTM Construction in Seattle, WA. He holds an M.S. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Kansas State University. Moloczniak serves as the ASSP Region I Area A Director and has previously served as Region I deputy regional vice president and president of the Puget Sound Chapter. He has also served on ASSP’s Editorial Review Board, and board of directors for the Washington State Governor’s Conference.