

## WORDS MATTER

### How Safety Talk Can Stifle Engagement

By E. Scott Geller

**These days, the phrase “words matter” is often used within a political context, reflecting the influence of verbal statements by politicians. Here, I want readers to consider how the words we use to communicate about OSH can stifle active engagement for injury prevention and health promotion.**

**Words have a powerful effect** on both attitude and behavior, and some words used habitually in OSH send the wrong message. For example, let’s consider an all-too-common term: *accident*.

#### Was That Injury an Accident?

The dictionary provides an expected definition of *accident*: “an event that happens by chance or that is without apparent or deliberate cause.” Relatedly, when referring to 3-year-olds having an “accident” in their pants, we assume they were not in control. They could not help it. Is this an appropriate term to use when referring to a workplace injury, a chance event with no cause? Don’t we want to promote and support the belief and the expectation that unintentional injuries can be prevented by controlling environmental, behavioral and attitudinal factors that can contribute to personal injury?

Many years ago, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration advocated for the use of the terms vehicle “crash” or “collision” instead of traffic “accident,” and, while transportation safety professionals have followed that recommendation quite consistently, many others have not. More often than not, the media reports a traffic “accident” rather than a vehicle “crash.”

What about safety professionals? Yes, many safety leaders use the term “incident” rather than “accident.” In fact, I could not find the word “accident” in the January 2021 issues of either *Professional Safety* or *Safety+Health*, except in quotations from older publications. However, the authors of three articles in the Decem-

ber 2020 issue of *EHS Today* used the term “accident.”

Note that the term “incident” is often used to refer to intentional tragic events, from shootings at educational facilities to aggressive mobs rioting in buildings and in the streets. Thus, it seems important to specify whether the incident was intentional or unintentional. I suggest we simply refer to an unintentional incident as an injury.

#### Does Investigation Invite Participation?

Safety professionals frequently use the phrase “accident investigation.” However, what does “investigation” mean? This term implies a search for a single cause or an individual to blame for a particular unintentional incident or injury, as in a “criminal investigation.” Who wants to be involved in an investigation to find someone to blame for an injury?

Indeed, the analysis process needs to be one of fact finding over fault finding. Note the term “analysis” in the preceding sentence. Using the phrase “injury analysis” instead of “accident investigation” will likely inspire more employee participation in the process of identifying potential contributing factors to an injury and exploring ways to eliminate these factors or decrease their impact.

#### Can You Find a Root Cause?

A common myth in OSH is that injuries are caused by one critical factor, the root cause. “Ask enough questions,” advises the safety consultant, “and you’ll arrive at the critical factor behind an injury.” When I ask audiences how many times they need to ask “why?” to arrive at the root cause of an injury, I receive a loud refrain in unison: “Five.” Ask “why?” five times, and you will find the root cause. How about that for a widely disseminated and seemingly accepted myth?

Do you really believe there is a single root cause of an unintentional incident, whether a close call, property damage or personal injury? If you consider the interactive effects of environmental, be-

havioral and person-based factors that influence safety-related performance, you must answer “no” to that rhetorical question. Environmental factors include tools, equipment, engineering design, management systems, housekeeping and climate. Then we have the actions or behaviors of everyone related to the mishap, as well as the attitudes, perceptions and personality characteristics of those individuals.

Given the dynamic interdependency of these factors, searching for a single root cause is irrational. Furthermore, cause-and-effect solutions cannot be found from information obtained from surveys, group discussions or personal interviews. Only correlational data can be obtained from such assessments, not causal effects. More importantly, an analysis of potential contributing factors, not a fault-finding investigation, is needed to explore strategies for injury prevention.

#### Should Safety Be a Priority?

How often have you heard a corporate manager or a flight attendant say, “Your safety is our number one priority”? The word “priority” implies importance and a sense of urgency, and the dictionary defines *priority* as “a thing that is regarded as more important than another.” However, our everyday experiences with priorities teach us that priorities change. A priority yesterday might not be the priority for today or tomorrow. Priorities depend on current demands, with top priorities shifting across situations and circumstances.

Do we want to associate safety with such a term? I believe a total OSH culture requires a shift from safety as a priority to safety as a value. The relevant definition of *value* in the dictionary is “a person’s principles or standards of behavior; one’s judgment of what is important in life.” Safety should be a value that employees bring to every job, regardless of the current priorities or task requirements. Thus, a safety mission statement should refer to safety as a value rather than as a priority, right?

#### Vantage Point

Vantage Point articles in *Professional Safety* provide a forum for authors with distinct viewpoints to share their ideas and opinions with ASSP members and the OSH community. The goal is to encourage and stimulate critical thinking, discussion and debate on matters of concern to the OSH profession. The views and opinions expressed are strictly those of the author(s) and are not necessarily endorsed by *Professional Safety*, nor should they be considered an expression of official policy by ASSP.

## Mandate or Expectation?

Is safety a mandate or an expectation? This rhetorical question raises the human dynamic of perceived choice, which connects directly to self-motivation and self-accountability. Specifically, people are more motivated to perform a particular behavior when they perceive some degree of personal choice. Hence, OSH directives should include words that minimize the perception of external pressure or control. The once-common phrase “Safety is a condition of employment” does not inspire self-motivation or self-directed behavior. In contrast, the slogan “Actively caring for safety and health is a core value of our organization” implies personal authenticity, interpersonal relatedness and human interaction, words that connect to self-motivation and self-accountability.

In addition to the “mandate” versus “expectation” words previously mentioned, consider the following contrasting words and phrases of everyday discourse as they relate to the promotion and the support of safety, health and human

welfare. How many of the words on the left suggest negative associations that can stifle engagement in an OSH process?

- “compliance” or “accomplishment”
- “requirement” or “opportunity”
- “program” or “process”
- “training” or “coaching”
- “peer pressure” or “peer support”
- “loss-control manager” or “injury-prevention facilitator”
- “I have to do this” or “I get to do this”

## Conclusion

This article attempts to make the case for removing certain words from OSH communication because they can stifle human engagement. Alternative words are suggested because of their association with human dynamics that relate to pos-

itive emotion and self-motivation. However, appreciating the critical relationship between words, attitudes and voluntary participation in an OSH process is only half the battle. Some of us need to change our verbal habits, which is easier said than done.

People need corrective feedback when they use words that stifle rather than inspire interpersonal engagement for OSH. Do you have the courage to suggest an alternative word when you hear words such as “accident investigation,” “root cause,” “mandate,” “requirement” or “priority”? Suggesting the use of a more appropriate word for OSH promotion and support is much easier said than done, but the outcome—improving words that matter—is well worth the effort. **PSJ**

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