

Safety

Only When Employees Feel Supported Will They Step Up and Say or Do Something if They Observe an Unsafe Situation or Behavior.

By Joe McGuire, Emily Haas and Scott Bohm

Over the past few years, “If You See Something, Say Something” has become a mantra in this country. We hear it on the news, see it on television or take note of signs with this message posted in airports, shopping malls and other public places.

From where did this slogan come? It seems this unofficial motto began in the days following 9/11, when Harry Bains called police to report that he spotted an alleged terrorist, accused of planting bombs in New York and New Jersey, sleeping in the doorway of his bar. He later told his patrons he “saw something and said something.” According to a *Washington Post* article (O’Haver, 2016) the phrase was jotted down by an advertising executive, Allen Kay, and stored in his office. A few months after 9/11, when the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) needed a safety slogan, he submitted the phrase as a contender. After reviewing all of the slogans submitted, the MTA selected it as its new safety slogan and spends up to \$3 million per year posting it on its trains, subway cars and buses as well as on radio and television ads.

Obviously, the slogan has gotten a great deal of buy-in as shown by an increase of suspicious package reports in New York, which grew exponentially in just four years. Not only is this slogan still used by those in public transportation, governmental agencies and cities but it has also been adopted for use by many businesses including some in the aggregates processing and heavy highway construction industries.

The Presence of “See Something, Say Something” in Health and Safety Programs

Incorporating “If you see something, say something” into a company’s health and safety program is a novel idea for getting all employees involved in day-to-day safety. It capitalizes on the idea that we are all our “brother’s keeper” by stressing our need to watch out for one another and, when someone does or is about to do something in an unsafe manner, we stop to discuss it. In theory, when “If you see something, say something” is tied to safety, it should help companies reduce incidents, accident and injuries on mine sites and related construction projects.

Even though this slogan may be promoted on the job, employees’ perceptions of this initiative is unknown. Do employees feel this is a “tattletale” program where they are being asked

to “police” the safety behavior of their co-workers? Or, do they step up and “say something” when they “see something” of concern?

Along with the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), companies encourage their employees to speak up when equipment, machines or conditions are not safe. Yet, research shows that employees sometimes see hazards or suffer what they believe to be minor injuries and do not tell their supervisors. In addition, Phillip Ragain of The RAD Group (Ragain, 2016) found employees are good at documenting the unsafe behaviors they observe, but they are not as good at directly intervening in those unsafe behaviors. They are not stopping and effectively changing unsafe behavior when it occurs. “When you consider that employees observe more than three unsafe acts a week on average – and 12 percent of employees observe more than five unsafe acts each week – this is a legitimate concern” (Ragain, 2016).

To illustrate, research has shown that a sense of powerlessness often keeps young workers from telling their supervisor about safety concerns (Tucker & Turner, 2013). Those involved in this study said they take a “wait-and-see” approach, in hopes that other workers might notice the hazard or that the situation would resolve itself.

In addition, workers did not believe individually that they would have any effect on the situation. When asked what would happen if they did not have co-worker support, one participant said, “You’d be alone and nothing would get done” (Tucker & Turner, 2013, p. 108). However, if co-workers share the same concerns about a hazard they are more likely to go and discuss it with their supervisor together.

Even though this slogan may not always be acted upon, there is no doubt many companies have employees who stop their work and say something to a supervisor or co-worker when a hazard, issue or unsafe condition is observed. In these cases, the situations are corrected to ensure no one is involved in an accident or injured on the job. In an ideal world, every time a hazard or problem is identified, employees will stop work, say something or do something about it. Unfortunately, we do not operate in an “ideal” world and this does not always happen. The barriers which prevent employees from saying something are not all known nor understood.

An Inquiry Into the Barriers of Speaking Up

Previous research involving 2,600 employees, found only about 39 percent indicated they would intervene in hazardous situations they witness at work (Ragain, 2016). We know employees generally take their responsibility for safety seriously. So, the question remains, when unsafe conditions or actions occur, why do workers say nothing approximately 61 percent of the time? Scace (2017) summarized Ragain's research to highlight several things, which may contribute to an employee's unwillingness to speak up when they see something that is unsafe. (Many of the reasons provided by employees during annual refresher education fit within these constraints.)

- **Pressure to Produce:** When employees feel pressure to produce they tend to block out everything around them and do not see the unsafe actions they or their co-workers may be taking to get the job done.
- **Unit Bias:** Is the inclination we all have to finish a task before we move on to something else? As a rule, employees, who see an unsafe condition or action, will wait to say something to a supervisor or co-worker until they finish the task on which they are working.
- **Deference to Authorities:** As a rule, employees will not speak up to their supervisors or "the boss."
- **Bystander Affect:** Suggests when there are more people around, the less likely an employee will speak up. In this situation, it is assumed someone else will help or speak up.
- **Defensiveness:** This is the natural reaction we have when confronted about doing something wrong. Research reveals 28 percent of workers become defensive and 17 percent become angry when a co-worker points out an unsafe behavior.
- **Stress:** If employees speak up, it has the potential to place them in a stressful situation with co-workers; therefore, they may not say something because of possible workplace and/or co-worker tension.
- **Rationalization:** Is our ability to accept things we like or believe and reject everything else. In cases where an unsafe action is observed, employees might rationalize not speaking up by saying "no one else has said anything, so it must not be a big deal."

What was also surprising about the results of Ragain's research is that they did not fluctuate across different industries, countries and cultures.

To further explore this issue, during several recent MSHA and OSHA annual educational sessions facilitators asked employees, "When we sometimes see a safety issue or hazard why is it that ..."

- We sometimes do not step up and say something when we ought to?
- We sometimes just look the other way?

Participating employees and supervisors indicated in the past there had been instances when they saw something but did NOT say something. Some of reasons provided for not doing so included:

- Supervisor will not listen.
- Cannot stop production.
- Do not want to get involved.
- Fear retaliation by supervisor or co-worker.
- Told not to worry about it and get back to work.
- It is not my job.
- Lack of leadership.
- Do not feel safe enough to speak up.
- It is uncomfortable.
- Told "you are not my boss."
- Do not want to cause trouble.
- Avoid or scared of confrontation.
- Always done it this way ... have not been caught.

The feedback from these workers is consistent with previously held and engrained beliefs among workers. For example, most companies give employees, without the threat of retaliation, the authority to stop work when they observe an unsafe situation. But, within the same study, 97 percent of workers said they were given authority to stop work at their company; however, the 39 percent rate of stepping up to say something or mitigate the situation still holds (Ragain, 2016).

Based on their responses and previous research, one might ask whether initiatives like "see something, say something" are effective or if they are just another flavor of the month? Every day, our employees see unsafe actions or conditions, which if brought up, could be stopped. However, because of the reasons listed above and causes outlined in other research, much too often nothing is said and the unsafe conditions or actions are not addressed. Why do employees stay silent? What keeps them from stepping up in these situations?

Using Research to Help Understand and Mitigate Perceived Barriers

Employees are provided with policies, procedures and best practices focused on keeping them safe while at work. But sometimes a company's culture, unintentionally, allows employees to drift from a written policy or practice to one which is less restrictive or not followed. The written or verbal safety messages, sent out by companies, are generally helpful in guiding employee behavior; but in the actual workplace, an employee's safety behavior may be different from what is desired and expected. As a result, having a pulse on your organization's current safety climate could provide valuable information into barriers to speaking up and taking proactive steps to mitigate hazards in the workplace.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), from 2016 to 2018, administered a series of safety climate surveys to employees in the mining industry. Results from these surveys shed more light into this phenomenon and help us understand why workers do not always say something when they see something.

External Pressures on the Job

First, previous research highlighted pressure to produce as

a primary reason for employees not stepping up and saying something if hazardous situations or actions are observed. Forty percent of employees in the NIOSH study also indicated they felt impossible production pressures to some degree.

One point of interest in these survey results is that, for those workers in their first few months on the job, they are more likely to feel less pressure. However, over time their perceived pressure to produce increases, particularly once they reach six years in their position. In this regard, workers with more experience in their job may be less likely to say something if they feel an increased sense of stress. In addition, data from the survey showed a positive correlation with workers' risk-taking behaviors. Specifically, as workers' felt sense of pressure to produce goes up, so does their risk tolerance.

In situations such as this, front-line leaders and co-workers must say something if unwanted safety behaviors, caused by not following policies and procedures, occur in the workplace. Specifically, companies need to look at how a "see something, say something or do something" initiative is delivered to their employees. To be successful, they must ensure supervisors and their teams truly understand what it means and know their actions are supported under all types of circumstances.

Employees need to know and believe it is not about "snitching" on someone or being a "tattletale" nor is it about blaming or pointing fingers at members of their team. It is about doing the right thing and taking care of one another. We tend to get hurt when we forget to do the little things, overlook some of the hazards associated with the tasks we perform or neglect to do things we know we should do. Helping each other, by pointing these things out, might prevent someone from getting hurt or even worse.

Insufficient Leadership

As mentioned earlier, employees in annual refresher education indicated they felt their supervisor would not listen to them if they said something and often lacked leadership. The results of the NIOSH survey show hourly workers have significantly lower perceptions of communication by supervisors than salaried workers. A specific item of interest was "My supervisor takes action if I don't follow health or safety rules."

Hourly workers scored significantly lower on this item than did salaried workers. So, if hourly workers feel like their supervisor will not take action, why would they step up and say something? Along these same lines, 15 percent hourly workers felt their supervisors did not really encourage communication about health and safety.

Much case study research indicates that poor leadership can result in accidents or even fatalities as well as poor mental and physical health among employees (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work [EU-OSHA], 2012). Additional occupational safety and health advocates argue the importance of leadership as well.

For example, in his article "Becoming A Safety Leader,"

Tavenner (2007) discussed how successful programs push the responsibility for safety down into the organization and that, as responsibility for safety is pushed down, safety becomes a team effort. Tavenner (2007) stated, "Safety is a team game that takes involvement from everyone. Developing employees into safety leaders and fostering an action-based culture while pushing responsibility for safety down into an organization creates a team based approach that results in superior performance."

However, employees cannot take responsibility for safety if they are too scared to say something. Specifically, in the NIOSH survey, 33 percent of hourly workers felt they could not question safety rules or procedures. Leaders, at all levels, will determine whether members of their team perceive they feel safe enough to speak up in their workplace.

Supervisors, who believe their only role is to manage people, budgets, projects and meet production demands, will probably be less sensitive to listening to members of their team who might be inclined to point out unsafe conditions or behaviors in the workplace. Having employees who observe something and say something will not occur if leadership is lacking.

Consistent Proactivity

Based on the research discussed, it seems that leadership is critical if we expect our employees to step up and say something when they see an unsafe behavior or condition. In a 2017 leadership seminar, a quote was offered by Kurt Uhler: "Leadership comes from influence, and influence can come from anyone, at any level and in any role."

Therefore, when circumstances present themselves and someone must step up or take charge, each of us has the potential to become a leader. There are still opportunities that can be seized in the workplace to further develop leaders. For example, the NIOSH survey found that 14 percent of employees do not make suggestions to improve health and safety. It can be hypothesized these same employees do not speak up if they see something unsafe at work. Along the same vein, 11 percent of employees do not regularly report health and safety-related incidents, turning an eye to hazardous situations.

Strong leaders, who strive to develop individuals and teams, will generally have the skills required to foster the openness and security employees need to encourage them to speak up when they see an unsafe condition or behavior in the workplace ... weak leaders will not have these skills.

Conclusions

Developing an understanding of why employees do not speak up, when they see unsafe conditions or behaviors, should encourage companies to develop educational practices aimed at improving employee involvement in workplace safety. Educational sessions, when developed, should focus on providing both front line leaders and employees, with the skills they need to effectively intervene when they observe something that is unsafe in their workplace. Improving

employees' knowledge in this area is important because Ragain (2016) found employees have a desire to speak up, but often choose not to intervene because they are not equipped to do so effectively.

From what was learned from employees during annual refresher trainings and with NIOSH safety climate research, it seems important to begin the process of growing a strong culture sooner rather than later. Particularly, employees in high-risk industries should feel supported and encouraged to speak up when they see an unsafe situation or unsafe co-worker behavior.

As a starting point, companies should consider conducting an evaluation of their safety culture, policies and best practices to see if they need to be updated or changed to allow employees to feel more comfortable speaking up if they observe an unsafe situation. Only when employees feel supported will they step up and say or do something if they observe an unsafe situation or behavior. If employees know they can approach their co-workers or supervisors and freely discuss safety concerns, without fear of retaliation or losing their jobs, positive changes in the culture and proactivity in the workplace will begin.

In addition to evaluating their safety culture, policies, best practices and skills of their leaders, companies must take time to evaluate how they educate employees about the need, intent and goals of all safety initiatives in which they expect their employees to participate. This educational process should include not letting our "ego" get in the way; being humble, stepping up and becoming a leader when circumstance require it.

Too often programs or initiatives are rolled out with little or

no employee education and as a result, they generate minimal participation or just "go by way-side." If employees are not provided with the "why" or given direction, they will not commit to following a program nor will they meet a company's expectations. As Ragain said, "We need to stop assuming that it is only a matter of motivation and start addressing the real factors that keep employees from speaking up and doing so effectively" (2016).

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Disclaimer

The findings and conclusions in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (NIOSH). Mention of company names or products does not constitute endorsement by NIOSH.

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