

December 2016. Humans are explorers by nature and tend to be more engaged when discovering information for themselves. Broadcasting “shoulds” and “have-tos” quashes energy and internal motivation.

“Typical” safety rarely taps into the energy of discovery, rather is based on prescribing, “This is what you should think/do. Or else (consequence).” This approach goes against the part of human nature that has sparked “Aha” moments. There does need to be bottom-line safety procedures to prevent serious injury. However, don’t make all communications, policies, and procedures rigidly dictated. Whenever possible, let workers discover and select from among several safe alternatives. To achieve a high level of safety and accomplishment, workers have to be able to think for themselves and make adjustments to new or changing conditions.

Here are 4 suggestions to promote discovery:

1. Move toward active engagement beyond expecting “participation.” Participation can be barely more than passively listening. Engagement is the goal. Invite and listen more and “tell” less.
2. Promote Eureka moments. “Eureka” means “I’ve found it!” These moments spring from energizing people, e.g., encouraging them to try on proposed/new PPE or tools to find out for themselves how well it works, whether it’s an upgrade or a downgrade from what they’ve previously been doing. Ask questions such as, “Do you notice less tension in your lower back with this technique?”
3. Offer principles rather than only conveying specific practices. Think of safety communication as helping workers understand “whys,” not just “whats,” they must adhere to. The more someone understands the more likely they will be able to find a range of acceptable ways for doing different tasks.
4. Enlist a range of worker wisdom for multiple right methods. Speak with experienced workers. It is likely each has come up with different variations for safely accomplishing their tasks. Alternatives may spring from different experience sets, range of physical conditions, gender, or size. Unless they are dealing with fatality potential risks such as lockout/tagout, convey expectations that there are many ways to successfully lift, push, cross uneven terrain, wield tools, get into and out of a forklift, and so on.

Whenever feasible, emphasize understanding and discovery, rather than issuing one-way-fits-all proclamations.

Pater, Robert. "Discovering Safety: Why Participation Does Not Equal Engagement." *OH&S (Occupational Health & Safety)*. 1 Oct. 2016. Web. 7 Nov. 2016.

<https://ohsonline.com/Articles/2016/10/01/Discovering-Safety.aspx?admgarea=magazine&Page=1>