10 Elements of Creating an Effective Safety Kickoff or Refresher Training

Many organizations start the year with a safety kickoff. Over the past 23 years, I have observed some of the best safety kickoffs. This article is a compilation of ten key elements I have discovered that make a safety kickoff effective. Use these as you begin to plan your next safety kickoff.

1) OUTCOME-DRIVEN
The desired outcome of all safety meetings is to improve safety performance and to eliminate injuries. However, to be effective, an outcome must be much more specific. A broad outcome will not cause people to actually change behavior or take action because it will often leave them in a state of wanting to do the right thing yet being uncertain about the specificity of the correct or desired action. Safety people who know how to focus on the specific are more effective.

Also, narrow down outcomes to an achievable number. My marketing director, Diane Weiss, helps our clients select between one and three outcomes for their safety kickoffs. This was a tough lesson for me to learn, and one of my speech coaches fought long and hard for me to keep each of my presentations down to three or four key points. Keeping yourself focused will allow you to be the best safety presenter you can be.

Guidelines for an Effective Outcome
The following guidelines are excerpted from my book, Mastering Safety Communication:

• State your outcome in the positive.
• Be specific about what you want.
• Take into account the current behavior or actions of the people involved.
• Dream big.

• Once you have your outcome, make it sensory-specific. For example, what will you see when people are taking the actions you desire? What will you hear when they behave in the desired fashion? What will you feel when you have achieved your outcome? What do you want people to hear, see and feel?
  • Make your outcome compelling.
  • Determine specific evidence of achievement. How will you know you achieved the outcome for which you are aiming? It is important to define success before you begin as it makes you more effective.
  • Is the outcome what you really want?

Your Outcome Is Your Yardstick
Once you have your outcome(s), you have a yardstick by which every element of the kickoff may be evaluated. If any element does not help fulfill your outcome, then you must be willing to consider leaving it out.

2) AUDIENCE ATTENTION

If no one is paying attention, it does not matter how important your content is. Without audience attention, your message is not getting through.

If you want an audience to listen to you, it is your job to listen to them. If you want an audience to pay attention to you, then you must pay attention to them.

How to Get an Audience’s Attention
There are many ways to get people’s attention. Over the years, people have said you need to have entertainment in order to teach. This is true; however, the word “entertainment” has a connotation that makes some people think you are not making the best use of time. I learned early on in my career as a safety speaker that people would not use corporate money for an entertainer. However, they had a need for effective safety speakers.

Entertainment in a safety kickoff or any presentation is only used to carry the message to the audience. In fact, everything in your kickoff should help achieve your outcome. Making the kickoff fun, entertaining, interesting or unique is only a means to help achieve your outcome. If it does not help achieve the outcome, then it is not appropriate.

How to Hold an Audience’s Attention
I tell engaging stories, some funny, some serious, that make a point. It is good to mix it up. I also use magic tricks that convey a point. In addition to keeping people’s attention, a good story, trick, cartoon, video or other clever part of a kickoff will help people remember what you were teaching.

When I end my presentation “Would You Watch Out for My Safety?”, I do a trick in which a dollar bill is destroyed and then appears inside a fresh lemon. The trick has people talking for weeks. Yet, that is not my only purpose in doing the trick. While doing the trick, I explain how I received the gloves I use in the presentation from someone who was watching out for my safety. I also use it to teach everyone how they should respond when someone watches out for their safety.

A good gauge of your success in keeping the audience’s attention is when people look forward to your next safety meeting.

Elements that help make safety fun and memorable include:
• music before a meeting and during breaks;
• entertaining videos before and during a kickoff;
• cartoons;
• visual aids that are creative and well done;
• stories told by employees;
• stories told by leadership;
• demonstrations (be sure all attendees can see them);
• contests;
• creative use of PowerPoint, such as slide shows of employees, etc.;
• skits to illustrate safety principles;
• games using favorite themes of current game shows.

3) Techniques Taught

For years, people have told workers to be “their brother’s keeper.” Aside from the biblical context from which the term comes, most people do not really understand how to be their brother’s keeper when it comes to safety. Specificity is important.

More importantly, it is not fair to tell someone to do something without teaching them how to do it. As with other mistakes people make in the field of safety, they just assume it is “common sense.” If it is so common, then why do not people do it naturally? In fact, the opposite behavior seems to be the norm, or at least more common.

The secret is that we must teach people how to do every task we give them or at the very least confirm they already have the ability.

Be sure to include the techniques necessary for achieving your specific outcome. To check this, ask yourself if you know for certain that your workers have the specific skills necessary to accomplish the outcome. I do not like to assume anything, so I find it easier to teach the skills as a refresher for the knowledgeable. This technique shows respect and implies they already know what you are teaching. You can indicate that it is a refresher for some and new information for those who have recently joined your team.

4) Relevancy

Have you ever been in an audience and wondered why you had been asked to be there? Nothing seemed to relate to what you do or how you do it. The problem was that no one had considered how relevant the material was to the entire audience.

People’s time is sacred. None of us know how many days we have left to enjoy life. To waste people’s time is to waste their life. Safety speakers are stewards of their audience’s time. I make sure my material is relevant to my audience out of respect to them, so that they will sense my respect for them and respond accordingly.

How do you make your safety message relevant to a diverse workplace? Let me share with you a common scenario that I encounter.

Earlier this year, I spent several days at a coal mine in Colorado. I gave three presentations a day to make sure everyone had an opportunity to see and hear my message. Every audience had a mixture of office workers, machinery operators, vehicle operators, mechanics, technicians, new employees and supervisors of one level or another. The secret is to make sure your content is relevant to all members of your audience.

The technique I have used over the years is to use stories and examples to which everyone can relate. It is possible to tell a story about someone underground to which the person working in the office above can relate. Including many facets in your kickoff is key. In some ways, it is like an old three-ring circus. There is so much going on that there will always be something for everyone.

A great example of keeping something relevant is the movie Titanic. For 3 hours and 10 minutes, James Cameron had our attention. The story had something for everyone. I am sure there were engineers in the audience saying to themselves, “If I had designed that ship, it never would have sunk.” Some people enjoyed the majesty and size of the ship. Others were engaged by the romance. In addition, others were struck by the dichotomy between the first-class passengers and those who traveled in steerage. When you plan your kickoff, keep everyone in mind.

You should also consider the gender mix in your audience. Does your kickoff team have a representative membership so all members of your organization can relate? When
you have a diverse safety committee, people attending your event or meeting feel better connected and therefore are more likely to act on what they learn.

Make sure your stories come from many backgrounds. Some people use nothing but sports metaphors. For those in your audience who are not into sports, that strategy can actually work against you. Talk to people to determine your employees’ interests and hobbies.

Keep in mind all aspects of your employee base from the security people to the office personnel to those on the manufacturing floor or in the operational areas of your company. The more you know about your audience, the more relevant you will be.

The best solution to keep things relevant is to focus on your audience instead of on yourself or your team. The audience always comes first. When you think and act as an audience member, you get a perspective that will make you much more effective.

5) CONTENT

A successful safety kickoff has many elements. The one most people think about is the content of the meeting and they often forget the importance of other elements. Ask yourself if your content contributes to the outcome you seek.

A Good Story Is Not Enough

The safety-speaking field is an interesting one. Practically any outside speaker you bring in will receive comments from the audience stating that they are the best safety speaker attendees have ever seen. The reason for those comments is that they have been exposed to boring safety material. A mistake safety kickoff organizers sometimes make is to confuse positive feedback with effectiveness. Too often, a great and moving emotional story has the audience in their grasp, but because they have not studied the science of communication, they do not achieve their desired outcome. It takes someone with knowledge of speech coaching and effectiveness to engineer a story so that it gets a result. Be careful whom you put in front of your employees.

PowerPoint Presentation Tips

A big part of many kickoffs today is some form of a PowerPoint presentation. I have actually received applause when an audience learned I would not use PowerPoint. The challenge is that PowerPoint has been abused just as many great tools get abused.

The key to a great PowerPoint presentation is to avoid being seduced by the technology and forgetting your message. I recently interviewed some great trainers. I asked them how many hours they spent preparing for their presentation and how many of those hours went into their PowerPoint presentation. For many of them, they spent more time on their PowerPoint presentation than on their content.

Here are some simple tips:
- Keep slides to a minimum.
- Avoid every cute trick. Once again, ask the question, “Does this contribute to the outcome of my presentation?” If the answer is no, you may have a problem.
- Just because you think it is cool that characters can noisily arrive on the page, not everyone else does. It seems disproportionately wonderful to you because you just spent hours discovering how to use the technology and want to share it with everyone.
- As a show, make sure they can hear the music.
- Check visibility by sitting in different places in the room.

Great Uses of PowerPoint
- PowerPoint as a multimedia slide show is one of its best uses.
- You can mix music and photos into a presentation to run before your meeting, during your meeting or during breaks.
- Combined with digital photography, you can put photos from that day into the prepared presentation.

6) EMPLOYEE PARTICIPATION/INVOLVEMENT

Participation may take many roles. Some help with the kickoff’s planning and execution. Some help only the day of the presentation. The list goes on. If you want to have one of the best kickoffs ever, involve as many people as possible. Also, if you have logistical people at your facility who set up the room as part of their job, recognize them as being part of the event. The extra recognition is often appreciated. Make sure as many people as possible own a piece of the safety kickoff.

To help involve many people:
•Delegate, delegate, delegate.
•Ask yourself, “Is anyone else capable of this task?” This is not to avoid doing the work but to involve others.
•Incorporate raffles, logistics and music.

Some of the most talented people are part of your workforce. Look around and ask for assistance. Ask employees if they know of anyone with special skills or talents who could help with:
•food setup;
•cleanup;
•door monitoring;
•handing out materials;
•audiovisual needs;
•taking attendance.

Employees Teach Employees
A safety kickoff often includes opportunities to teach. Using employees for this function improves participation, enhances learning, puts employees in a role model position and adds credibility to the knowledge being conveyed as it comes from someone who is doing the work.
This also sets the stage for employees to move into the training function, thereby increasing their motivation to understand the concepts taught.

7) Logistics
Announce logistical details during the first morning. These details may be about emergency information, exits, restrooms, food or anything else pertinent to your kickoff.

Cell Phones & Pagers
Creative ways to ask people to turn off their cell phones include theater announcements using old movie cuts, jokes or skits. Use these strategies to announce to please turn cell phones and pagers off. Provide cell phone and pager breaks so your employees may check their messages and voicemail. You can reinforce your safety message by encouraging people to text their friends about what they have learned.

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Breaks
Announce to your audience how and when you will take breaks. Let them know if breaks are scheduled or if they will be taken when the presenter feels necessary.

Sound Systems
Use a microphone for all questions or comments. Be sure to repeat all questions from the audience so everyone can hear what was asked.

Questions
Encourage people to ask questions anytime during the presentation. Questions can be handled in several ways. If having people raise their hands during a video or speech is difficult, let people know they can write down their questions and hand them in during breaks. This also provides an opportunity for those too shy or intimidated to ask a question. Have attendees put their names on their cards so you can get clarification if necessary.

Never mention the name on the card when reading the question out loud. To encourage questions, ask a few people to submit questions ahead of time and then begin by calling on them. Make sure you give them a copy of their question so when you call on them, they have it. Also suggest to people during the meeting to write down questions in note form so when the microphone reaches them, they will not have forgotten their question or comment.

Tell people, “Feel free to ask a question anytime.” This wording is important. I often hear people say, “Feel free to interrupt anytime with a question.” The word “interrupt” has too many negative connotations and is by nature something people will avoid. You are subliminally telling them not to ask questions because they grew up surrounded by parents and teachers who always told them not to interrupt. Your invitation will not overcome that programming.

Tips for Handling Questions
•In asking an audience questions, we often leave them unable to answer or do not give them enough time to develop an answer; therefore, we shut them down.
•Questions asked of an audience should be preframed or simple enough to cover with an immediate answer.
•Ask questions of the group, but always call on individuals for answers.
•Never go fishing for answers when people cannot provide the correct response. When the audience keeps getting an answer wrong, it kills audience participation and teachers attendees not to raise their hands.
•Make sure whenever possible that you help the audience succeed if you want to continue the specific behavior.

Kickoff or Celebration Team Members
Let people know whom to contact on your team if they have any special needs with which you can help. Many teams wear a distinctive shirt that allows members to stand out in a crowd. This also builds team spirit and is a nice way to thank them for their extra work.

Other Kickoff Tips
•Use nametags. Calling people by name is powerful.
•Have preferred seating arrangements. Make sure people can see and hear.
•Insist that all speakers use public address systems.
•Use your physiology to convey passion.
•Remove any podium—let your audience see you.
• Take breaks as the audience needs them.

8) Creativity
• Creativity is the key to discovering new solutions.
• Creativity is learned.
• Creativity improves with practice.
• Look for models of creativity, such as Walt Disney, Stephen Spielberg, George Lucas, etc.
• Begin by believing it might be possible or at least believing it is not impossible.
• Ask yourself empowering questions.
• Help others be creative.
Examples of creativity that add to a meeting include:
  • giveaways;
  • themes, such as seasonal ideas, presenting the kickoff as a game show and doing the kickoff as if attendees were all on a flight and you were giving an airplane safety briefing;
  • music;
  • safety slogans;
  • safety posters;
  • clothing with safety slogan;
  • candy bars with safety slogan wrappers;
  • skits that convey a safety message.

What You Need to Know About Safety Slogans
I was speaking for a company, and as we entered their meeting room, the first thing I saw was a giant 12 ft. x 4 ft. safety banner. It was one of those with grommets that you can post outside on a chain-link fence or between posts. As I looked around the room, all of the walls had similar banners, presumably from previous years.

This was a great use of old safety banners. The only problem was the first banner was an example of a well-intentioned but incorrectly written safety slogan. The banner said, “Accidents happen in the blink of an eye!” This was meant to convey that an injury could happen quickly and unexpectedly. However, the banner text looked like this:

ACCIDENTS HAPPEN
In the blink of an eye!

The predominant message was “Accidents Happen.” It is not the most useful belief. I explained to everyone who walked into the room and received the message unconsciously that accidents happen, which takes prevention and personal responsibility out of the equation. They removed the banner and threw it away a few minutes later. You must be cautious when choosing a safety slogan or drawing a safety poster. You can often send the wrong message.

9) Scheduling

When Is the Best Time to Hold a Safety Kickoff?
The best time is any time when all of your people can attend. That can be a logistical challenge. Some companies hold a safety stand-down day during which they do nothing but safety and health events. This is great if you can do it.

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More commonly, safety teams schedule two to three meetings per day for one or a series of days to allow all shifts to attend. Involve the night shift. Making it possible for them to enjoy the same kickoff as everyone else does much for morale and lets them know you care about them.

Also, location is not critical. I have spoken next to a turbine at a hydroelectric dam on the Columbia River. One construction supply company used a stack of sheetrock as a stage with rails. Turnaround or out-age lunchroom tents have served as my speaking venue many times over the years. One refinery rented chairs and used their firehouse to hold the meeting.

Should Attendance at Safety Kickoffs & Meetings be Mandatory?
As with much of safety communication, congruency tells the real story. The answer for me is achieved by asking a follow-up question. Are your marketing meetings mandatory? If all of your other departmental meetings are mandatory and safety is not, it sends the message that safety is not one of your company’s corporate values.

Lunch vs. a Dedicated Meeting
Safety and the messages you want to get across are far too important to stack on top of lunch unless the presentation is done after or before everyone has eaten. The distractions are just too great. Have I done lunchcheon presentations? Yes, but I know they are less effective than they could be. Once again, it speaks of the value your leadership puts on safety. If there is not time to do it right, then everyone perceives safety as taking a backseat to everything else.

10) Food

Many of the most successful safety meetings and kickoffs include food as part of the event. Be consistent with what you have done in the past. If employees are used to having food or refreshments and you cannot provide them, it is best to let them know ahead of time to eliminate disappointment. You can always exceed people’s expectations. Disappointment can really damage the results of a meeting.

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