

# SAFETY COMPLIANCE LETTER

Incorporating *Safety Management*

## Getting Workers to Wear PPE: Communication Is Key

by *Jennifer Busick, MPH*

It's a familiar problem in many workplaces: you've done the job hazard assessment, engineered out as many hazards as you can, put work practice controls in place to minimize exposures, and provided personal protective equipment (PPE) for all of the hazards that can't be otherwise eliminated.

Then you discover that workers aren't wearing their PPE, or are only wearing it when they are being directly observed. Why? The problem may be something you can solve simply by changing the way you communicate. Effective communication can go a long way toward improving compliance, says Peter Sandman, a risk communication consultant based in Princeton, N.J. Listen hard to what your workers tell you about why they won't—or why they will—wear their PPE, says Sandman, and let that information tailor your response.

### Communicate Understanding

If employees aren't wearing their PPE, there's a reason. It may be a reason you think of as "legitimate"; for example, there may be a safety issue created by the PPE itself. In hot environments, chemical protective equipment can cause heat stress and put workers at risk of heat stroke. In a humid environment, workers who wear protective eyewear may not be able to see because their eyewear fogs up. But even if the "reason" sounds more like an excuse to you, don't waste your time fighting it, Sandman says. "Validate the objection. You won't undermine the rule, as long as you make it clear that the rule is important for reasons that outweigh the objection."

For example, if workers complain that safety gear is unattractive, simply admit it. "I know, we all look silly wearing chemical protective goggles—like a bunch of fish! But we still have to wear them when we're working around chemicals, because blindness is no joke, and it only takes one accident."

It may sound foolish, but Sandman has seen it work. Maybe it's because communicating understanding by acknowledging and legitimizing worker complaints is a technique that also communicates risk and increases your credibility—two other methods for getting your message across.

### Communicate Risk

One of the conclusions that employers jump to when workers refuse to take safety precautions is that workers don't understand the risk. And it may be true that in some cases, employee training can help to improve compliance. In order for workers to wear safety gear, they have to know they need it. It is not enough to conduct a noise assessment, buy a plastic bucket of foam earplugs to put in the work area, and send out a memo. Workers need to know what hazard they are exposed to, how serious that hazard is, why the hazard can't be eliminated from the workplace, and how their safety gear will protect them. But communicating risk can be a tricky proposition.

### Sometimes when workers refuse to wear their safety gear, the issue is one of control.

**Be careful with scare tactics.** Sandman warns that it can be a mistake to use "scare" tactics exclusively. For one thing, human beings have a limited capacity for fear. "Increased levels of alarm are not sustainable," says Sandman. "Someone who is in a constant state of heightened alarm has post-traumatic stress disorder." In order to reach a sustainable level of concern, workers who become fearful of one thing will become less fearful of something else. "One of the effects of 9-11, of people becoming increasingly afraid of terrorism," Sandman points out, "was that calls to environmental hotlines dropped. People quit worrying so much about pollution."

The workplace can present a similar scenario. Workers who have just been through a training session on trench-

ing and excavation safety may have a heightened awareness of those risks and precautions—and a reduced awareness of electrical or mechanical hazards.

A way to offset the effect is to design into your training some area for workers to be less cautious about. If you want workers to be more cautious, for example, about overhead and falling object hazards, then include in your training a discussion of something they can be less concerned about. Inform them, for example, of an area in the workplace where hazardous chemicals are no longer used, so that they no longer need to wear chemical protective gear in that area.

**Risk homeostasis.** Another problem that can arise when you're trying to communicate risk to workers is the idea of "risk homeostasis." Some psychologists theorize that individuals seek a certain level of risk in their lives, and some personalities are more prone to risk-taking than others. Those people tend to choose higher-risk professions. "There have been extensive studies of fighter pilots," Sandman notes. "They tried to find ways to get fighter pilots to drive more safely in their cars. They couldn't do it. That type of personality is a risk-taking personality, and there's really no way to get them to drive more safely." Studies of highway safety seem to show a similar phenomenon. "When you reengineer a road to make it safer, people drive faster, and you end up seeing the same number of accidents you saw before you changed the road," Sandman says. When you ask workers to become safer by wearing PPE, you are making them take less risk. They will replace that risk somehow, possibly in another area of their job, which defeats your purpose.

How to deal with this problem? There are no magic bullets, but there are a few useful strategies. "Studies have shown that if you engineer a greater feeling of risk into the road, people will actually slow down," Sandman says. Transparent barriers on overpasses are one way to increase people's feeling of risk, without actually making the road less safe. "If you give people enough fraudulent risk,

they will be more tolerant of safety precautions in other areas. So, for example, you could take your miners bungee jumping—which is relatively safe, but has a high perceived level of risk—and fulfill their need for personal risk. They'll be safer at work."

Another strategy is to replace risk motivation with other motivations. "The history of hard hats is instructive," Sandman says. At first, hard hats were seen as a symbol of caution in professions where workers prided themselves on their courage and risk-taking. "So they made a rule: You have to remove your hard hat in safe places," Sandman says. "Suddenly, what was a symbol of caution became a symbol of someone who worked in a dangerous environment." Acceptance increased.

Acceptance increased even more when workers were given exclusive insignia for their hard hats—a strategy of identification long used by the military. Hard hats became a symbol of membership in an exclusive group that did dangerous work. Allowing workers to personalize their hard hats was another important step; like allowing airplane crews to name their planes, individuation gives each member of the group a way to achieve individual recognition. "You'll know you've succeeded when you see workers wearing their safety gear outside work," says Sandman. "It's become a symbol of the dangerous work they do, and they're proud of it."

The most important thing to remember when you're trying to communicate risk to workers who want a higher level than you can permit is this: "Do something other than ask them to want what they don't want—a lower level of risk."

### Communicate Power

Sometimes, a struggle over PPE becomes a struggle over power. "Sometimes when workers refuse to wear their safety gear, the issue is one of control," Sandman says. "And wanting control over your own actions is legitimate." In a situation like this, a heavy-handed approach is liable to backfire; workers don't like to feel as though they're being mothered. "All those decades of warnings from our parents irritate us: 'Don't play with matches,' 'Don't major in humanities,' 'Don't marry that girl.'" At some point in their development, adults reject this treatment and start deciding such matters for themselves. "Then

along comes the safety manager, and he sounds just like mom," says Sandman, "so the reaction you get is the reaction of a rebellious child asserting his independence." How can you prevent this type of power struggle from interfering with safety?

**Acknowledge how you sound.** Roll your eyes, laugh, and admit it: "I sound like your Mom or something, don't I?" It takes the sting out of the situation, and makes compliance more palatable.

**Engage in dialogue.** Form a plant safety committee, and give members some say in the decision making process. Rather than presenting a solution ready-made, guide the discussion: "We're having lots of accidents in the warehouse. What should we do?" If you make people responsible for themselves and each other, you're less likely to be seen as the overprotective mother hen.

**Offer a degree of control.** Ask if you could offer a range of options to workers, and let them choose for themselves. "Set a minimum standard," Sandman suggests. "Tell workers they have to at least meet some minimum." Beyond that, offer some more protective options, and let workers choose. There are two advantages to this method: one is that you'll improve compliance with the minimum level of protection, and the second is that you have redefined a certain amount of what was noncompliance as compliance. People who were rebels, threatening to undermine the entire system, have been brought within the system.

### Communicate Credibility

Is safety number one in your workplace? Really? Or is that just the slogan? Workers know whether safety is really more important than productivity. This is reflected in their safety behavior: do they only wear their PPE when the inspector or the safety manager is present? "Every organization has rules you're supposed to obey, and rules you're only supposed to pay lip service to, and workers know the difference," says Sandman.

One classic example of knowing the difference and using it to advantage is the union tactic of the "rulebook slowdown," where workers slow production by meticulously following every rule—even the ones they would normally ignore for the purpose of getting the job done. "Safety precautions have long been in the 'lip-service' category at many companies. People

know that they pretend safety is the priority, while really production is the priority." These workers are not being willfully disobedient, Sandman says; they think they're doing what you really want them to do.

The answer is to send a clearer message—a fully credible one. At one mining company in Australia, Sandman says, workers who had been told over and over again that their safety mattered more than anything else clearly didn't believe it. They believed that production and the bottom line were actually the company's priorities, and were taking safety shortcuts based on that belief. The answer was to change the message to one the workers could believe. "We changed the message to emphasize that every accident that was prevented saved the company money," Sandman says. That was a credible message; one the workers would put faith in—that safety was important because it was in the company's best financial interest. Compliance improved.

In another company with a good safety record, the vice president showed up at a party celebrating 2 million safe man-hours and told workers, "I used to work at a facility where we had an accident that killed three people. I had to go to three families, and tell them what had happened. I want you to be safe, because I don't ever want to have to do that again!" As with the business argument for safety, this was fully credible to workers; they believed that safety was important to their employer because their employer wanted not to go through an extremely unpleasant experience again. His reason for asking them to be safe was believable to them.

So next time you catch someone not wearing their safety glasses, hard hat, respirator, or gloves, ask why, and listen carefully. Do they need to know that the reasons for using the equipment outweigh the discomfort? Be understanding. Are they cavalier about the risk? Provide another outlet for risk-taking behavior. Is it a power struggle? Give them some. Do they not believe your safety message? Make it more credible. Effective communication can pave the way to improved compliance with PPE rules—and other safety rules as well.

More information on communicating safety effectively can be found at Peter Sandman's Web site, [www.psandman.com](http://www.psandman.com). ■