Aging Workforce, Closing the Communication Gap

By Carl Potter, CSP, CMC and Deb Potter, PhD, CMC

Closing the communication gap between generations is a step toward a safer future workplace. Each generation has worried about the future based on the current generation of 20-30 year olds. Hopefully we can improve the future safety of work sites by improving communications among all generations of workers. Have you ever noticed that the younger workforce of 20’s and 30’s just does not seem to listen?

They are listening, but in much different ways than those in their 40’s, 50’s and 60’s. In many cases the 20- and 30-somethings are challenging what is being said to see what is correct and incorrect based on the behavior of who is doing the talking. For them actions speak louder than words. They are also living in a world of a lot of answers without really understanding the question. If you want to know something, “Google it.” So for any group of 20-30 year olds they want to see if what is being said is believable. Sometimes what is said may not match the behavior. Sometimes it takes decades to change the beliefs and behaviors of a generation.

Even the Bible tells how God confused the Israelites for 40 years in the wilderness. They wandered around lost until the offending generation was gone, then they were allowed to enter the Promised Land. For each generation there is a testing time of beliefs and values. This testing time tends to mold the generation’s actions based on what the previous generation told them, what they observed, and the history of the previous generation. Hence we have the old saying, “Actions speak louder than words.”

The behavior of every generation of 40-50 year olds was established in their 20s and 30s. Today’s 20 and 30 year olds are being shaped by a world that has experienced technology that could never be imagined by previous generations of 20 and 30 year olds. Not only the internet, but the ability to instantly communicate to another person around the globe has changed everyone’s ability to process information. For past generations in their 20s and 30s changing technology was approached with caution and the acceptance curve was long. Today’s 20 and 30 year olds are creating their world in open architecture where they can instantly test their ideas and innovations to see if anyone is interested. If no one responds instantly, the 20’s and 30’s move on to another technology. They are moving on while the rest of seem to be stuck on a
## Accident Summary For The Month Of August 2014

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*Accident Previously Reported  FT=Full Time  PT=Part Time*
Accidents for August

August 2014
Western, WaKeeney Vehicle Accident:
Cooperative vehicle struck tree limb breaking side mirror off.
Lost Time: No

August 16, 2014
LJEC, McLouth Lineman
Injury: Muscle strain to lower back.
Cause: Cooperative employee was preparing to install a distribution padmounted transformer. Employee was moving large rock to be able to lower outrigger to stabilize cooperative’s digger-derrick.
Lost Time: No

August 20, 2014
Wheatland, Scott City Lineman
Injury: Muscle strain to shoulder.
Cause: Cooperative employee was hanging conduit on a wall, ladder fell and employee tried to catch themselves on the way down.
Lost Time: No

August 21, 2014
Flint Hills, Council Grove Lineman
Injury: Puncture wound to shin.
Cause: Cooperative employee was spraying right-of-way, and got a locust thorn imbedded in their leg.
Lost Time: No

August, 2014
Lane-Scott, Dighton
No accident form submitted
Lost Time: No

August, 2014
Western, WaKeeney Vehicle Accident:
Cooperative employee slid off road while reading meters in a cooperative vehicle causing damage to door and corner of cab.
Lost Time: No

August, 2014
CMS, Meade
No accident form submitted
Lost Time: No

August 21, 2014
LJEC, McLouth Lineman
Injury: Muscle strain to shoulder.
Cause: Cooperative employee was preparing to install a distribution padmounted transformer. Employee was moving large rock to be able to lower outrigger to stabilize cooperative’s digger-derrick.
Lost Time: No

Upcoming Events

2014
Transformer Workshop
November 18-19, 2014, (Topeka)
(For more information, go to www.kec.coop)

Metering Workshop
November 20-21, 2014, (Topeka)
(For more information, go to www.kec.coop)

2015
KEC Underground (URD) Workshop
May 19-21, 2015 (Pratt Vo-Tech)

KEC Hot Line Schools
September 9-11, 2015, (Pratt Vo-Tech)
September 15-17, 2015, (Manhattan Vo-Tech)
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learning curve at times.

In my research on this subject I found 7-tips that might help to close the communication gap and improve safety in the workplace:

1. Understand the Audience
When communicating be sure you understand your audience. In the case of our current 20-30 something people, they are driven by family. According to research I have reviewed this may be due to the fact that family was important to generations beyond the most resent one. They have seen their parents place a high value on working and getting “stuff” while their grandparents placed a higher value on family. For this reason they place more value in spending time with friends and family than they do in having a house, two cars, and a boat in the garage. Sometimes their means of “spending time” is via technology such as the internet, texting, Facebook, etc.

For this reason we may interpret their lack of commitment to their work as lazy and being self-absorbed. But if we change the way we view them and approach them as family and friend we may find someone who listens to our counsel. To be listened to, we need to do more listening.

2. Listen to the Conversation
Listen to the conversations and you will find a generation who is not impressed by bravado as much as by action. Many of the 20-30s I interact with will send me notes about YouTube videos or “cool” sites that I can join to find information about mutual interests such as flying and Jeeps. They are not interested in sites about how to make more money; they are interested in how to spend more of their free time with me. Everyone and every generation has developed their own normal behavior and they can be challenged without causing a fight.

3. Challenge the Norms
Challenging someone’s behavior is simply challenging the norms. When we see a 20-30 year old texting during work times it tends to go against the norms of people in their 50’s and older. Our norms came from a generation where work time was so specific we punched a time clock and could not leave the workplace 30 seconds early without written permission. We couldn’t make a call or communicate with family while we worked because we had to find either a phone with outside lines or a payphone. Most of the norms that really bug us about the 20-30 generation is driven by technology. The only way to deal with it is to embrace it.

4. Embrace Technology
Stop saying, “I’m too old to learn new technology” – that’s’ wrong and you know it. The only reason we say things like that is because it challenges our norms (sound familiar?). Embrace technology and don’t be afraid to say to a 20-30 year old person, “Wow, that’s interesting! Can you show me how that works?” You will be surprised how much the technology is just an improvement of what you have done in the past.

5. Be Interested and Become Interesting
My son who manages information for a large petroleum company has shared a lot with me about database work that he is doing. At the same time I was able to tell him about the vast rows of filing cabinets where I had to go to find information to plan a job in years past. Suddenly I am interesting because I was interested. When we take time to talk to each other with mutual respect and admiration for our different knowledge and experience we find our uniqueness. Then we can truly work together and find ways to participate in creating a safer and more enjoyable workplace.

6. Create Real Opportunities to Increase Participation
Participation is key to building bridges of understanding and success in the workplace. People in their 20-30s are not robots, slaves, or continued on page 5
lazy but they are different for many reasons. Finding ways to allow them to participate as leaders gives them a chance to exercise responsibility. Tailboard discussions should not be the only time they are asked to participate in the work. When planning a job ask their opinion and don’t knock their thoughts. You may find that they have some interesting viewpoints that can make the job go smoother, but the more critical part is that they have been asked for their vision of how things should be done. Keep in mind that the future belongs to them so we need to take the long view.

7. Think 10 Years Ahead

Thinking ahead ten years gives us a better way of communicating with 20-30s. The future is always uncertain to everyone, but sometimes it scares us to think about what might be coming. As a leader in your industry it is important to think ahead just like it is important to look as far down the road as possible when driving a vehicle. Looking in the future helps us to make decisions based on what we think will create a safe and successful workplace. The next ten years will bring challenges because of change in technology and values of the next generation of worker.

When one bases his life on principle, 99 percent of his decisions are already made. ~ Unknown

When people who are now in their 20-30s are 40-50 they will be asking, “How do I communicate with these 20-30 year olds?” and if they base their life on key communication principles they will already know how. The generation of people ahead of our generation was no different. They looked at us and shook their heads wondering what we were thinking.

Our future is uncertain, but what you do to improve your ability to communicate and help the current 20-30 year olds to improve their communications will lead us into a better future where everyone will take responsibility for safety, so that everyone can go home every day without injury.

Carl Potter is a board-certified safety professional (CSP), and is a certified management consultant (CMC). His body of work includes the development of the Hazard Recognition and Control Workshop and authorship of seven books, including the best-seller, “Who is Responsible for Safety?” He is a frequent speaker at industry conferences and corporate safety-focused events. Carl may be contacted at carl@potterandassociates.com.

Deb Potter, PhD, is a certified management consultant (CMC), and specializes in safety management consulting for high-risk industries. As the author of “Zero! Responsible Safety Management by Design”, she works with leaders at all levels of organizations to develop zero-injury cultures. She is on faculty in the School of Advanced Studies at the University of Phoenix. Deb may be contacted at deb@potterandassociates.com.

Special thanks to Potter and Associates for allowing KEC to reprint this article.
Using Best Practices to Drive Safety Culture

By Tim D. Self, CUSP

During the years that I have worked with power companies as a safety and training consultant, I have seen a lot of missed opportunities to create a strong safety culture. Most of us have a keen eye for what the next best practices for compliance may be, and we are good at implementing them, but we don’t always utilize their true potential to drive change, drive culture and really make a difference.

Let’s take a look at an example and walk through the missed opportunities to which I am referring. The written job briefing is a well-known best practice that is often used, but do all of yours consist merely of a check-the-box-and-sign-it type of document, or do they require the crew to perform comprehensive job hazard analyses? Is anyone checking to see that the job briefings are not only complete, but that they are done to a standard that equips and stretches your crew to recognize and mitigate the hazards on their jobs? When you visit a crew on a job site, do you ensure a briefing has been completed before the work begins? Do you go back to the job briefing in the case of an incident or accident and review it while analyzing the root cause? If failure to recognize and mitigate a hazard resulted in an incident or accident, are you coaching your employees to avoid a similar situation in the future? Are you disciplining them for failing to meet the standard you set for the job briefing?

Setting the Standard

The old model of a foreman sitting on a job with five to 10 guys all day long is not how most of us operate anymore. A foreman may have as many as six two-man units scattered across multiple counties. Therefore, we must equip our employees to be stronger safety leaders of their own groups. They must have proper hazard recognition and mitigation planning skills. We are pushing more and more responsibility for on-the-job decision-making down to crew levels to achieve the operational readiness and effectiveness we need. However, training alone will not help us reach this goal. It’s imperative that we drive change and culture by setting a standard for performance and assigning true ownership in these responsibilities. Once this standard has been defined, you must hold employees accountable for performance that adheres to the standard. It is only then that we really begin to reap the true benefits of the best practice.

In regard to accountability, I feel it is necessary to point out that it is very important to ensure that when we coach or discipline, we do it in a way that is edifying to the
Using Best Practices to Drive Safety Culture

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employee and the company. Discipline that is not intended to teach people and improve their skills is retribution, and it will take away from all the work you have done up to this point. When you have a team that is committed and actively engaged, it can be difficult at times to not let your emotions become frayed when you have to modify unwanted behaviors. You have to work hard in this area to control emotions. It is sometimes helpful to allow the leadership team to spend a day or two analyzing the situation to determine the best approach to discipline.

It Starts at the Top

So, where do we begin the journey to creating a team that is actively engaged and focused on driving a strong safety culture? It must start at the top and work its way down, utilizing executives, managers and frontline supervisors. Equipping frontline supervisors with the proper knowledge and tools, in my opinion, is where the need is the greatest since they will be the ones to deliver and sell these safety culture concepts to the crews.

Utility industry organizations, including “Incident Prevention” (www.incident-prevention.com) and the Utility Safety & Ops Leadership Network (www.usoln.org), offer direction, networking, and training for supervisors and safety leaders. I encourage you to find and utilize these educational opportunities to help equip your workers. You and your leadership team need to act as a cohesive unit to build a strong safety culture at your company and on your crews. When you and your leadership team work together to convey clear and precise expectations, and when you are committed, actively engaged and foster an environment of ownership and accountability, you become a force that will change and drive a strong safety culture. Let’s get serious about saving lives. Stay safe!

Thanks to “Incident Prevention” for allowing KEC to reprint this article. If you would like more articles, please visit their website www.incident-prevention.com.