



Lessons for effective and sustainable safety communications in the logistics industry

Focus on safety culture, not just safety compliance

You may think that you are clearly articulating your safety messaging and communications but how clearly are your staff hearing these, understanding these and implementing them? How is your safety messaging presented to your staff? Does it fit with other messaging from your organisation?

What does qualitative data from domestic and international aviation, shipping, logistics and rail companies tell us about how staff respond to managers' safety messaging?

Insync's research data indicates that:

- Many staff in logistics often struggle with safety messaging. An inappropriate context for safety messaging often means that staff often ignore safety messaging or do not appreciate the wider organisational importance of safety.
- The cost to organisations from poor safety messaging is significant and extensive. These costs cover lost time, lost productivity, unacceptable accident and injury rates, risk management, governance issues and lost opportunities to boost engagement. Investing in better focused communications can yield significant improvements in sustainable safety messaging.

Here are our recommendations, derived from real issues faced by frontline staff, on how your safety communications could be improved and made sustainable.

1 Tailor safety messaging to your audience: clarify the links to employees' roles explicitly, or provide them the opportunity to do so at local level.

Employees often complain that long, dry regulatory communications are forwarded on mass to staff that perform totally different roles in different organisational functions. Individuals report problems in working out how and why which aspects apply to them, leading to inconsistent adherence and compliance.

"The emails about safe lifting mean totally different things to me in a train servicing depot, working with pulleys and hoists, than they mean to an office admin assistant lifting envelope boxes ...but we still get forwarded the same email from head office...someone should filter it, or a manager should go through and work out which bits are relevant to our team and just communicate that bit."

2 Limit the number of safety messages and group smaller, less urgent messages together.

As one shipping employee said:

"On some days I have received over 20 safety emails, a couple of which were over 70 pages long, there's no way I can read through all that, so you just leave it in your inbox!"



3 Summarise key safety policies and procedures to maximise impact and make them easier to remember.

Don't structure safety policies and procedures in isolation from other forms of your communications. Structure your safety policies and procedures so that they clearly reflect and complement your organisation's focus and culture.

4 Select the most effective channel of communication for your audience.

The manager of a rail-track maintenance crew said:

"It's all well and good for management to email or print long safety bulletins for staff; some of my guys are awesome at banging nails into the track but can't really read or write. For them face-to-face delivery is the best way to get messages across...that way you know they've received it and it gives them the opportunity to ask questions."

5 If you are serious about safety messaging doesn't just make it a top-down process; staff need the opportunity to check their understanding, to clarify areas of ambiguity and to provide feedback about how theory translates to reality.

A common complaint amongst logistics staff is that once they have received safety policies from "head office", they get little to no follow-up if they go back with questions or concerns. More alarmingly one group of signalling engineers cited instances where pressured staff in central control rooms became annoyed if they phoned to check on non-emergency safety issues. Similarly a Rolling Stock maintenance depot reported the stress of working alone through the night and having no-one to discuss issues with.

"It's stressful...I'm under pressure to get a train fully operational by 4.30am but it's the middle of the night and I have no-one to check something with...I could phone the on-call manager but he won't be impressed with being woken at that time!!"

6 Safety messaging is often best delivered through experiential rather than theoretical learning.

Staff in the shipping industry explained how "hoisting" and "working in confined spaces" training made so much more sense in a simulated environment rather than a classroom. Similarly, rail staff talked of the practicalities that were only highlighted to them when re-enacting rather than discussing station evacuation scenarios.

7 Apply the principles of targeted safety messaging, best channel usage and inclusion in experiential safety learning to third party contractors.

Often the use of third party contractors undermines the take-up rate of safety adherence in logistics organisations. It is simply impractical to communicate every single piece of safety policy and protocol to contract staff that may just be filling in for short durations.

In summary, ensuring that your organisation's safety communications are based around "want to" rather than "have to" and that they complement other types of messaging from your organisation will ensure greater traction and sustainability for this issue that is so important to both staff and managers across logistics organisations. A safety culture focus rather than a safety compliance focus will ensure that this can be achieved.