

Coaching employees: building relationships and improving results

This resource is part of SAIF's leadership project, which is meant to help employers and leaders of organizations establish strong and sustainable safety cultures using research-based concepts and strategies.

Leaders have the important role of creating a healthy workplace by fostering a strong safety culture. Some ways to do that are by providing encouragement and reinforcement for employees who work safely, addressing risky behavior, and removing obstacles to working safely. That approach is called **safety coaching**.

It's not just leaders who should coach employees. To create a truly robust safety culture, leaders should promote an environment of open communication where all team members feel comfortable coaching each other to prevent work-related illnesses and injuries.

Approaching others to encourage safe work or to offer coaching can be uncomfortable and is often difficult. Making sure you have a productive and effective discussion that results in a lasting positive outcome is even harder. The solution is to develop strong safety coaching skills throughout the organization. Here are the steps of the coaching process when encountering unsafe behavior:

Step in to prevent employee illness/injury

The first step is to ensure the safety and health of the employee by stopping work and removing the person from the hazard. Show sincere concern about the employee and don't accuse or blame. The main goal is to effectively correct future behavior, not to catch the employee or punish them.

What should you say?

- *I am really concerned that you will get hurt working like this. Please stop what you are doing right away.*
- *Your safety is very important to me and our highest priority as a company.*
- *I don't want you to get hurt.*

Ask questions to understand the situation

Next, seek to understand why the unsafe behavior is occurring in the first place. The focus is on the situation rather than the person. Open-ended questions help us find the facts. Avoid making assumptions or thinking you already know the answer. The purpose is to learn why the employee chose to work this way to reveal contributing factors.

What should you say?

- *Can you please help me understand why you are working like this?*
- *What obstacles are preventing you from working safely?*
- *Why are we not able to follow our normal policies and procedures?*

Follow up with an offer to help

Third, let the employee know that they're not alone and that you're here to help. Keeping employees safe is critical to you and your organization. Supervisors can

"A coach is someone who can give correction without causing resentment"

- John Wooden, UCLA basketball coach 1948-1975 and winner of 10 NCAA national championships

“The best way to motivate employees to work safely is to thank them when you see them working safely.”

– E. Scott Geller, behavioral psychologist and author of *Working Safe: How to Help People Actively Care for Health and Safety*.

facilitate employee engagement and systemic improvements that will lead to a safer workplace.

What should you say?

- *You're not alone in solving this. I'm here to help you work safely in whatever way I can.*
- *I'd like to help you fix these issues permanently.*
- *I can follow up with the executive leadership to address this challenge.*

When should you offer safety coaching?

- You observe unsafe behavior or conditions
- Employees express concern
- There is a new employee or process
- There is an increase in incidents or injuries
- You observe safe behavior

Keep in mind that positive interactions should outweigh negative ones 5:1 as positive reinforcement has shown to be far more effective in driving behavior.

There are many different techniques and approaches to safety coaching. It's important for leaders to find a coaching style that works for your team and workplace culture.

Safety cop vs. safety coach

We've already talked about how important it is to stay positive when you are coaching. If not, you can quickly become a safety cop and your role is seen solely as an enforcer focused

on punishing employees rather than helping to improve safety in the workplace. Here's a trait comparison:

Safety cop

Authoritative
Focuses on the negative
Goal is to catch employees
Points fingers
Doesn't take responsibility
Hides or sneaks up on people
Punishes

Safety coach

Collaborative
Focuses on the positive
Goal is to find solutions
Seeks to understand
Takes responsibility
Openly conducts observations
Coaches

Summary

Safety coaching is an effective way to improve workplace safety while engaging the employees in solving issues and challenges. It will take some time and practice to build an open communication culture, but the ultimate outcome will be more positive than just preventing injuries—it will also grow relationships and build employee engagement.



What's a safety coach?

Someone who cares about the safety of others and is willing to speak up.



What's safety coaching?

The process of working with employees to reinforce safe work behavior, recognize hazards, collaborate to remove barriers, and identify and implement solutions to ensure a safe work environment.

Activity ideas

- Conduct a roleplay based on a picture of unsafe behavior (see example of improper ladder use). One person is the supervisor and others are the employees. What kinds of questions would you ask? What would coaching look like? Now, switch roles—what would a safety cop approach look like? Discuss the differences between the two approaches.
- Talk about a specific workplace issue you are facing. Discuss how you can use coaching techniques to address it.
- Practice coaching techniques on the job then share your experience with the group. What went well? What can you do better?