

Training employees in safety and health: best practices

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.



Training is an important aspect of keeping workers safe and healthy; it's a way to provide clear expectations while ensuring workers have the knowledge and skills to perform their tasks effectively. However, not all training is created equal and there are strategies that increase retention and engagement.

Learning styles

People learn in various ways. Hearing, seeing, reading, and doing are all methods to consider when looking at sharing safety and health information. Because it's challenging to cater to multiple learning styles in one training session, it's helpful to offer the same material in a variety of training methods.

Training methods

- **Teach back** – After learning the material, create an opportunity for the student to teach back to the class. It can be a good opportunity to check for understanding as well as to solidify the learning points. The downside is that some students may not be comfortable presenting in front of others and there may be different levels of comprehension, resulting in incorrect information being taught back.

- **Games** – These can be a fun way to learn information and are very popular for refresher courses. This can promote participation and can be highly energetic and engaging. For trainers, games take some time to develop and not everyone likes games.
- **Hands-on demonstration** – This is one of the best techniques for tasks that require physical actions because it aids muscle memory formation. This can build confidence in the learner because they are doing the activity themselves. It might be harder to do this with larger groups or if the equipment is not available for training.
- **Tour** – This involves taking a “field trip” to a specific facility or work area to review equipment or processes. It makes the material easier to understand as participants can see how it is applied to the real world, and it makes learning more interesting, too. It can take a lot of time to do this, and there can be issues with controlling an environment where work is being done.
- **Case studies** – Trainers can use a real story or news report to discuss how something similar could happen at their organization. It can create participant

engagement as it is around a real event. The downside is that the examples may not apply well to your organization, or you may need an expert to facilitate.

- **Group discussion/brainstorming** – Discussing and exchanging information freely within a group is a proven way to learn from one another. It promotes participation and often captures perspectives that aren't always shared. It requires a strong facilitator to ensure the discussion isn't dominated by one person and it could take more time.
- **Tests/questionnaires** – Taking a test is a good way to learn and a great way to assess learning levels. They can cover a lot of information and provide an easy way to get data in areas where you might need to change training methods. It takes time and effort to design and there may be participants who have test anxiety.
- **Computer-based learning** – This method has become more popular as a live trainer is not needed, and it is an easy way to convey basic safety and health information. It can be self-paced and designed to be more interactive. Because it is one-way, there is less opportunities to ask questions and learners need a computer and often access to internet.

- **Reading/watching videos** – Participants read materials or watch videos to get the required training. While it can improve consistency of materials, it is a passive form of training and may be hampered by lack of reading skills and the inability to check for understanding.
- **Lecture** – This is one of the more traditional methods of training, with an instructor at the front of the room sharing information with attendees. A good presenter can capture and hold the attention of the participants while sharing a great deal of information. On the other hand, it can be one-sided, and learners may tune out if they are not interested in the material.

Which training methods should you use?

First, know your audience. That will help you decide what you train as well as how you train. Then, select the training method that works best for your organization and your subject matter. For example, telling someone about lockout/tagout procedures is not as effective as taking them to the circuit box and demonstrating the procedure. It's even more effective if they perform the lockout/tagout procedure themselves.

While each training method has advantages and disadvantages, a combination of training methods often works best.

Boost retention

Making training memorable can be challenging, especially if the topic doesn't sound exciting to workers, or trainers are caught in a pattern of using the same materials over and over. Three ways to increase retention:

1. Involve the senses.

Engaging as many senses as you can during learning makes subject matter easier to remember. Watching a demonstration while listening to a description of it is a great example of using more than one sense.

2. Evoke emotion.

Learners who experience an emotional reaction to the content also remember it better. Storytelling is a great technique for evoking emotion and making training stick.

3. Repetition. Saying the same material over and over sounds tedious, and it is. However, presenting the same material in a variety of ways repeats the message, and makes it easier to remember.

Activity ideas

- Review your current training to see how it stacks up against best practices. Consult Oregon OSHA's rule obligation page (bit.ly/46BaWuB) to see training requirements.
- Group discussion: What parts of your training work well? What can be improved? Consider training methods that would work best at your organization and for your specific job tasks.
- Review the one-page training sheets at the top of the safety and health talks page on saif.com (saif.com/safetytalks). Pick one to review at your next safety meeting.