

# A Word to the WISE

Advancing women in the OSH profession

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## Inclusion & Accountability

### A Relationship-Centered Approach to Incident Prevention

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There is no accountability in a fear-driven organization in which people feel they do not matter—that they are peripheral to the important work that must get done. Why would anyone be motivated to take on responsibility, exceed minimum requirements or contribute their creativity if s/he did not feel they were part of the solution? Furthermore, how do people know they are important at work? Isn't it because we are included in decision making? Isn't it because our opinions are sought out and our work respected? Isn't it because we feel we are part of the trusted circle?

This question becomes critical when we face challenges such as eliminating fatalities and serious injuries because the preventive activities—focus, attention to procedure, sharing information, planning, risk mitigation—all depend on an individual willingness to perform these activities even when no one is watching or directing.

Managers believe that if employees spoke up to stop unsafe actions, then incidents would be reduced and possibly eliminated. This often feeds the unspoken judgment

that people would speak up if they felt a sense of personal accountability.

This reflects a limited understanding of why employees do not speak up. Lack of personal responsibility is not the reason. People do not speak up because managers do not listen. How do employees decide managers do not listen? They arrive at that conclusion when managers do not follow up or respond to their feedback; when managers dismiss their concerns without adequate consideration or explanation; or when managers are ignorant of how their reactions demean people and send intentional or unintended messages that they do not care.

Why don't managers listen? For all the same reasons any individual may not listen. A manager may feel

threatened, may not have the mind space due to stress, or does not perceive the person speaking or his/her information to be important. Any of these conditions are understandable from a human perspective, but a leader who wants engaged employees who will hold themselves and others accountable cannot afford to fall into these traps.

**A relationship-centered approach is based on inclusion. It is achieved through personal conversations during which people feel informed, heard, valued and respected.**



### How Exclusion Shuts Down Communication

A [healthcare study](#) found that only 58% of 4,200 nurses felt it was safe to speak up to stop a medical error even after tremendous efforts to create better procedures and to ensure that nurses felt empowered to speak up. Why is it so difficult for nurses to speak up? According to neuroscience findings, most people hesitate to speak up because a threat response triggered in the brain warns that we risk losing status, credibility or remaining part of the group. This fear is a biological response linked to survival from the days when being thrown out of the clan meant death. Consequently, it is difficult to give or receive feedback unless we have a well-established relationship in which we have the credibility and status to deliver or receive it.

Just as nurses feel trepidation at pointing out a doctor's error, employees feel it could be dangerous to point out management's shortcomings. Laws are in place to protect people from workplace retaliation, however the law covers only a few circumstances that must meet a high standard of proof. Exclusion is much more subtle, yet it can be just as damaging. Examples include not being invited to a meeting or getting important information, receiving fewer personal development opportunities or interesting assignments, or not being included in social events. While these actions may seem trivial compared to getting fired or demoted, neuroscience shows they are felt as equally threatening.

### A Relationship-Centered Approach to Incident Prevention

A relationship-centered approach is based on inclusion. Healthy relationships create an environment where information can be freely shared. It is achieved through personal conversations during which people feel informed, heard, valued and respected. People feel safe when raising concerns about unsafe actions or conditions because they know it will not result in exclusion or retaliation.

The price paid for exclusion is huge. Once a person feels excluded, no longer part of the group, s/he also

limits the information share back with that group. This typically leads to nonreporting of safety concerns and low engagement in safety efforts.

Research has shown that safety performance improves with the level of trust and open communication. It also shows that employee engagement increases with the strength of relationship with direct supervisors. So supervisors are important to success, but they cannot do it alone. Middle and upper managers must play their roles in building relationships through social interaction.

Despite the research, managers insist that they do not have time to talk to one-on-one with employees. Instead, they support behavior observation programs that make employees responsible for having those crucial conversations. Many such programs fail because management neglects to establish the relationships that make people feel safe about raising concerns and giving feedback.

When you ask an employee to perform a behavior observation, you are asking him/her to risk rejection from the person being observed. You are also asking the person being observed to accept input from someone that observee may not know or who has not established credibility. Training in communication skills is not enough to overcome these barriers. Before delivering feedback, we must establish a relationship by being helpful. This is the path to mutual purpose, shared knowledge and mutual respect.

### Educate Managers on the Importance of Relationships

In my experience, train-the-trainer workshops are most effective in converting managers to the importance of relationships. During these workshops, managers learn how to facilitate and train direct reports on communication skills. More importantly, these sessions help transform the underlying cultural belief from one in which employee resistance is expected to the belief that everyone can and wants to contribute to the success of the company. (Thank you, [Douglas McGregor!](#))

This approach works. If you want people in your organization to speak up, first build the safety net that will reduce the threat of exclusion or rejection. Leaders must model and teach the skills to build inclusive relationships.

What have you tried that works? Let's make this happen by starting the conversation and sharing our experiences. If you are interested in learning more about my approach, [send me an e-mail](#).

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