

LEADERSHIP & CULTURE

Communicating Health & Safety

By Leyla Hussein • 19 March 2019



I once asked [a new starter](#), a fortnight into the job, what he would do if a piece of equipment near his desk started smoking. He looked at me blankly. He had signed the [health and safety](#) policy on day one, along with a dozen other forms, and had not read a word of it. He is not the exception. He is the rule.

Health and safety is too often overlooked in business. Depending on the company it is either enforced heavily or barely enforced at all. A new starter arrives, is handed the written policy along with the rest of [the induction](#) pack, and is expected to read the whole thing and follow it to the letter. But how do you actually know they have read it, understood it and are putting it into practice? Most people skim, assume it is the usual, be careful in hazardous areas, take a break from the screen now and then, and move on. The real danger is that the company then assumes its employees have read it too. Assuming is not knowing, and the gap between the two only matters at the exact moment something goes wrong.

Making sure the rules are actually followed

Telling employees that health and safety matters happens all the time. Doing it effectively, and following it up, does not. When these messages land, most people give you the nodded head and go straight back to work. So how do you make sure the rules are genuinely being kept?

Regular internal checks and tests. It sounds obvious, and it is nowhere near common enough. External audits are scheduled well in advance and the policies get skimmed just before, which means there is no spontaneous testing and therefore no

realistic picture of what people actually do day to day. The newer the recruit, the more frequent the checks should be. The more dangerous the environment, the more frequent again. Your own unannounced checks keep everyone genuinely alert to their surroundings and clear on the right course of action, all the time, rather than slipping into the relaxed habits that build up when nobody is looking.

Matching the checks to the risk

The more hazards in the environment, the stricter and more regular the checks need to be. For an office-based role the same intensity is not necessary, because the environment is far safer, more stable and largely unchanging. That is not an argument for doing no internal checks at all, just for doing them less often. Checking in on your team this way does two things. It gives you the assurance that your people are working safely, and it gives them the confidence that if something does go wrong, they already know exactly what to do. Both are worth far more than a signature on an induction form nobody read.

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