How a Safety Manager or Trainer Can Reignite Engagement in Safety Culture, Especially Among Tenured Employees



If safety engagement has gone flat, tenured employees are usually where it shows first.

They sit quietly during meetings. They already know what is coming next. They have seen the posters, the videos, and the annual refreshers. They comply, but they are no longer mentally present. From the outside, it can look like resistance or complacency. It is often something else entirely.

It is fatigue.

For safety managers and trainers, this is one of the hardest challenges to solve. The people with the most experience, the deepest institutional knowledge, and often the strongest informal influence are the same people who feel at least energized by traditional safety messaging.

Reigniting engagement with this group does not require louder messaging or stricter enforcement. It requires a shift in how safety is positioned, discussed, and shared. It requires moving from reminding people what they already know to involving them in shaping what comes next.

Why Tenured Employees Disengage From Safety Messaging

Most long-tenured employees did not disengage because they do not care about safety. Many disengaged because safety stopped feeling meaningful.

After years on the job, experienced workers have survived hazards, incidents, close calls, and change initiatives. They have seen rules come and go. They have adapted to production pressure. They have learned how work really gets done.

When safety training continues to focus on basic rules without acknowledging that lived experience, it creates a disconnect. The message becomes repetitive, generic, and disconnected from reality.

There is also a psychological element. Tenured employees are often proud of their competence. When safety training feels like it is talking down to them or questioning their judgment, they disengage quietly rather than argue.

This is not defiance. It is self-preservation.

Engagement Does Not Come From More Information

One of the most common mistakes safety managers make is assuming disengagement means people need more education.

In most cases, the opposite is true.

Experienced workers already know the hazards. What they wrestle with is tradeoffs. Time pressure. Staffing shortages. Aging bodies. Changing equipment. New workers who do not yet see risks.

When safety messaging ignores these realities, it feels disconnected. Engagement drops because the conversation does not match the job.

Leadership and culture experts have been saying this for years.

Patrick Lencioni often points out that people disengage when they feel their perspective does not matter. In his words, “**People don’t buy in because they don’t feel listened to.**”

In safety, listening is the missing skill.

Shift The Role Of The Tenured Worker From Audience To Contributor

The fastest way to reengage experienced employees is to stop positioning them as recipients of safety messaging and start treating them as contributors to safety outcomes.

Tenured employees carry operational wisdom that no procedure manual can capture. They know where shortcuts happen, why they happen, and which risks are tolerated because production depends on them.

When safety managers invite that knowledge into the conversation, engagement changes almost immediately.

This does not mean asking for complaints. It means asking for insight.

Questions like what has changed in this job over the last five years or where do new workers struggle the most invite reflection rather than defensiveness. Experienced workers respond because the question recognizes their value.

This approach aligns closely with the thinking of Simon Sinek, who often emphasizes that people engage when they feel they belong. As he puts it, “**People don’t work for companies. They work for people.**”

When safety becomes something built with them rather than delivered to them, ownership follows.

Replace Reminders With Relevance

One of the reasons tenured employees tune out is that safety messages rarely change, even when the work does.

New equipment is introduced. Staffing levels fluctuate. Production targets shift. But safety talks often stay generic.

Relevance is the antidote to fatigue.

Instead of repeating the rule, focus on what is different today. What is harder than it used to be. Where the margin for error has narrowed.

For example, an experienced worker may have performed a task safely for twenty years. But aging joints, slower recovery, or reduced staffing can change the risk profile dramatically. When safety messaging acknowledges that reality, it feels human rather than bureaucratic.

This is where coaching matters more than instruction.

Use Coaching Conversations, Not Lectures

Coaching based safety conversations are especially effective with tenured employees because they respect autonomy and experience.

Rather than telling people what to do, coaching asks them how they do it and why.

Leadership researcher Brené Brown captures this idea well when she says, “**Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind.**”

In safety, clarity does not come from reciting policies. It comes from honest conversations about expectations, constraints, and decisions.

When a safety manager asks an experienced worker to walk through how they manage risk on a task, the conversation shifts. The worker becomes a teacher. The safety professional becomes a learner. Mutual respect grows.

That respect is the foundation of engagement.

Make Safety About Problem Solving, Not Policing

Tenured employees disengage quickly when safety feels like enforcement rather than improvement.

If every safety interaction ends with a correction or reminder, people stop participating. They learn that speaking up leads to scrutiny rather than solutions.

Reigniting engagement requires reframing safety as a shared problem-solving exercise.

When someone raises a concern, the response should not be why did you do that. It should be what made that the best option at the time.

This approach surfaces systemic issues rather than individual blame. It also aligns with modern regulatory expectations that focus on effectiveness, not just compliance.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration and Canadian regulators alike increasingly look at whether employers understand how work is actually performed, not just how it is written.

Give Tenured Employees Visible Influence

Nothing disengages experienced workers faster than being asked for input that goes nowhere.

If you want engagement, feedback must lead to visible change or a clear explanation of why change is not possible.

When a suggestion is implemented, acknowledge it publicly. When it cannot be, explain the constraints honestly.

This transparency builds credibility.

It also reinforces accountability. When people see that their input shapes decisions, they are more likely to own the outcome, even if it is not perfect.

Address The Unspoken Reality Of Risk Tolerance

One of the most powerful ways to reengage tenured employees is to acknowledge that not all risks are treated equally in practice.

Every workplace has informal risk tolerance. Certain shortcuts are accepted. Certain rules are enforced selectively. Experienced workers know this better than anyone.

Ignoring this reality creates cynicism. Addressing it openly creates trust.

A skilled safety manager will say something like, we all know there are times when this rule gets bent. Let’s talk about why and what that tells us about the system.

This kind of honesty is uncomfortable but transformative. It turns safety into a real conversation rather than a scripted one.

Train Supervisors To Protect Engagement

No amount of safety messaging will reengage tenured employees if supervisors undermine it.

Supervisors shape daily experience. If they dismiss concerns, rush conversations, or prioritize output at all costs, disengagement spreads quickly.

Safety managers must work closely with supervisors to align expectations. Engagement dies when supervisors say one thing and do another.

Leadership experts consistently emphasize this alignment. Culture is not what leaders say. It is what they tolerate.

Measure Engagement Differently

Traditional safety metrics do not capture engagement. Completion rates and attendance say nothing about attention or ownership.

Better signals include the quality of questions asked, the specificity of hazard reports, and whether experienced workers participate voluntarily in discussions.

Near miss reporting often increases when engagement improves. This is not a failure. It is a sign that people are paying attention again.

The Mindset Shift That Matters Most

Reigniting safety engagement among tenured employees requires a mindset shift for safety professionals.

The goal is no longer to convince people that safety matters. They already know that.

The goal is to make safety meaningful again by connecting it to reality, respecting experience, and sharing ownership.

As Peter Drucker famously observed, “**The best way to predict the future is to create it.**”

In safety, the future is created through conversation, not repetition.

Closing Thoughts

Tenured employees are not the hardest group to engage in safety. They are the most powerful when engaged well.

They influence new workers. They shape informal norms. They see risk early.

When safety managers move from reminding to listening, from policing to coaching, and from messaging to dialogue, engagement returns.

Not because people are forced to care, but because they are finally invited to matter.