When Communicating Safety – Keep Statistics Simple



Train the Trainer – Tips for Presenting

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From 1996 to 2000, the top five accident types for Company A in the field servicing sector were:

- struck by – 16%
- motor vehicles – 11%
- falls from elevation – 10%
- musculoskeletal – 22%

Meanwhile, Company B in the drilling sector reported these figures:

- struck by – 16%
- falls from elevation – 22%
- caught in object – 10%
- musculoskeletal – 22%

Not by the Numbers

Now, without looking, can you repeat all but a couple of those statistics accurately? Probably not. No doubt they left an impression, perhaps even a surprise, but by the time you got to the last one it was time to move on. No more numbers!

Statistics can be made to do all kinds of things, including bore people to distraction, which is the last thing you want to do during a safety meeting. Reeling off endless facts and figures won't give your audience what it wants and needs. People aren't going to respond enthusiastically to pure information; they want to know why it is significant and how they can use it.

Using Stats Effectively

That's not to say you should never use statistics. Far from it. Presented sparingly and well, they can help get your message across. Here are some suggestions to help make your training more engaging and effective.

- The most common way to make statistics more interesting is with graphs, bar charts and the like. But don’t expect these to do the entire job. Some people have difficulty spotting the trends these illustrations are supposed to show.
- Also, unless there’s an important reason to give exact numbers, round them out. For example, 64% can translate into “nearly two-thirds”. And drop the decimal points. “Slightly more than half” can be a lot more digestible than 53.2 percent.
- Here’s two suggestions from well-known safety training expert Richard Hawk:
    - “Whenever you use statistics in your presentations, think of how you can make them meaningful for your audience. Rather than simply reciting the fact that, say, 50% of North Americans will experience at least one bout of serious back pain in their lives, divide your group in half, somehow indicating one side to be back pain sufferers.
    - “Break down your lost-time incident rate to show how much it increases the chances of a person in the room getting seriously injured when it rises. That way, employees will realize that the ‘numbers’ can affect their life and happiness.”

Conclusion

To be an effective safety leader, you need to be able to arouse enthusiasm in your crew—enthusiasm for working safely and well. And that means you need to be able to communicate effectively. In short, doing the math is fine. Just make sure it’s presented to your employees in a way that is meaningful and relevant to them.