

## CEO health and safety conversations that have impact



Engaging in high-quality health and safety conversations is critical in order to increase sensitivity to the weak signals of potential failure.

### The goal

- Create opportunities for meaningful health and safety conversations within your organisation
- Foster a climate of trust, respect and open communication
- Understand work-as-done in order to identify early warning signs, as well as more effective ways of working
- Strengthen workforce engagement by ensuring people feel valued and involved.

## Why CEO health and safety conversations are important

*Work-as-imagined* – that is the formal description of how work is to be done – is what managers, regulators, etc., believe happens or should happen.

*Work-as-done* is how work is actually carried out on an everyday basis, and often differs from work-as-imagined.

*Performance variability* reflects a necessary attempt by people working in an organisation to deal with the constant efficiency/thoroughness trade-off of everyday work.

Adjustments are often made to compensate for less-than-ideal conditions (e.g., limited or unavailable resources, imperfect information, insufficient time, conflicting priorities, etc.).

Performance variability is both the reason everyday work is safe and effective, and the reason things sometimes go wrong.

Work-as-done usually goes unnoticed (except in the context of analysing an adverse outcome).

The only way  
to understand  
work-as-done is  
to talk with those  
who do the work.

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**Neil Postman**

“To ask is to break the spell.”

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# How to have a CEO health and safety conversation with impact

## Before

### Preparation

- **Do your homework:**  
Make sure your preparation includes finding out about the kind of work undertaken at the site, and what's been happening there recently
- **Be clear what you want to get out of the conversation:**  
Consider whether to focus on looking back (i.e., understanding 'snapshots' of failure) or looking forward (i.e., anticipating problems that might lie ahead). How will your questions and/or approach to the conversation differ?
- **Prepare some open questions:**  
Consider how your questions might inadvertently 'prime' staff to tell you what they think you want to hear. Think about words or phrases to avoid.

## During

### How to approach the conversation

- Take on the role of creating – and role modelling – meaningful health and safety conversations with your people
- Practice humble inquiry – the gentle art of asking instead of telling – in order to build relationships of trust and respect. Candid health and safety conversations will not be possible otherwise
- Use the conversation to jointly make sense of what's going on in the work situation
- Be curious, responsive and open to different perspectives
- Listen without judgement
- Encourage conversations about weak signals of potential failure
- Understand that weak signals are often missed because they are hidden from sight, go unnoticed, or people are reluctant to speak about them
- Be alert to factors that can suppress weak signals (e.g., fear of blame or losing face)
- Don't be put off by strong emotions
- Focus on the quality – rather than quantity – of questioning
- Be clear that everyone can make a difference, and set the expectation that they will do so
- Do not mistake meetings, emails, etc., for conversations.

### What questions to ask

Ask open questions for which you do not have the answers and questions designed to tease out typical performance. Remember the goal is to find out – and make sense of – how people actually do their work.

#### Ask questions like:

- What does your work involve?
- Is there an optimal or 'best' way to carry out this activity? Can you talk me through that?
- How stable are the working conditions?
- Is your work usually routine or does it require some improvisation?
- Do you ever have to adjust the way you do the activity to the situation? How?
- How do you decide which way to proceed?
- What can we do to change or improve the situation?
- What can I do to help with that?

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## After

### Making it stick

- Take 5 minutes to reflect on the conversation:
  - What went well?
  - What didn't go as well?
  - How did the person react to you?
  - What will you do differently next time?
- Consider what you have learned about work-as-done, particularly where it differs significantly and/or regularly from work-as-imagined. How might this be resolved?
- Add a regular item on 'learnings from health and safety conversations' to your executive meeting agenda
- Seek out other opportunities to share learnings with colleagues
- Coach colleagues in the art of high-quality health and safety conversations
- Create the expectation that leaders will regularly engage in health and safety conversations.

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### Kurt Vonnegut, Jr

“I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you see all kinds of things you can't see from the center.”

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Thanks to *Leading Safety* for providing the content for this resource. *Leading Safety* is an Auckland-based consultancy that specialises in researching, developing and supporting CEO safety leadership. It also delivers the Forum's *CEO Safety Leadership Development Series*. [www.leadingafety.co.nz](http://www.leadingafety.co.nz)

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## About the Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum

The Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum inspires and supports its members to become more effective leaders on health and safety. The Forum has more than 200 members, who are CEOs or Managing Directors of significant New Zealand companies.

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