



“As an owner, one of your critical concerns is always return on investment.”

## STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING YOUR RETURN ON TRAINING

Successful businesses are dynamic. Technologies and client needs are always changing, and if you and your employees don't keep up with those changes, understand them and find ways to take advantage of them, you may soon find yourself losing business to a competitor. The way to keep everyone in your organization on top of those changes is through training. As an owner, one of your critical concerns is always return on investment. Read on and we'll discuss simple strategies you can use to maximize the return on your investment in training, specifically, jobsite safety training.

Safety training usually takes the form of the "weekly safety meeting" or the "toolbox safety talk." We'll look at three different tactics for

improving the return you get on your investment in safety training and you'll see examples of how to implement these strategies easily and effectively.

### Strategy I: Improve Your Learning Environment

Your "learning environment" is the combination of external factors that make it easier or harder for your employees to learn. Some factors that impact the learning environment include place (will the meeting be inside or outside?), setting (will there be a place to sit down?), focus (will the crew be eating, drinking or smoking?) and potential for distraction (is the area noisy?). Creating or finding a good learning environment can be a challenge, especially on a jobsite, but it is possible and not

necessarily all that difficult.

First, find a place to conduct your safety meeting where your crew can focus. Avoid visual distractions such as other workers, busy streets or even parking lots. Avoiding disruptions can be as simple as moving inside the structure or to the "quiet" side of the job trailer.

Minimize the effect of distractions by making sure you and your training topic are the center of attention. Keep your crew's attention by engaging them. Make eye contact with your audience while you talk. Your efforts will make your presentation more effective in a couple of ways. When the crew knows that you're looking out at them, (at least on occasion), they are less likely to be distracted, to day-dream or to horse around with the guy next to them. Look at them,

and you'll be more likely to notice if someone has a question or a puzzled look on his or her face. Making eye contact forces you to look up from your notes; looking up will slow down your reading pace a bit and will keep you from reading in a monotone voice. At a very basic level, making good eye contact tells the crew that they are an inherent part of the safety meeting and that you're not just reading at them because OSHA says you should.

Another way to engage your crew during the safety meeting is to ask a few questions. You can come up with questions and answers easily, without having to research the answers. The easiest way to come up with these questions is to look for answers in the

## Injury Statistics:

1. In 2003, construction workers at age 35 to 44 were the most likely to be involved in a fatal accident, while workers at age 25 to 34 were the most likely to be injured.
2. In 2003, 11,860 construction workers sustained head injuries—that's an average of 47 head injuries each day!

(All stats are from 2005-2006 NSC Injury Facts)

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“ Improve your learning environment by changing it—take your crew to a part of the site that matches the topic of the safety meeting. ”

safety meeting. Try this: Before your talk, scan the meeting and look for numbers, statistics or lists of items. If you find a list; you can easily turn it into a question. Make a note of the question you create just above the list. Then, when you get to that point in the meeting, ask your question, pause, and look up to let the crew know it's a real question, not a rhetorical question. Don't worry if nobody has an answer. You can supply the answer, or since the answer shows up in the following text, just continue

to read. Asking one or two questions (and pausing briefly for answers) is a real attention-getter. You may even see looks of surprise—as if to say “Hold on, do you actually expect me to take part in this safety meeting? I thought you were just going to read it.” If you make questions a regular part of your safety meetings, your crew will get into the habit of paying more attention.

Improve your learning environment by changing it—take your crew to a part of the site that matches the

topic of the safety meeting. In some cases this may be impractical, impossible or even unsafe, but in other situations, it's pretty easy and will help improve retention. For instance, if the topic of your safety meeting is cranes and there is a crane on the jobsite, hold your meeting near the crane. Then, you can point out features and parts (like the headache ball and the swing radius) as you talk about them. Crew members who learn by seeing—as opposed to simply hearing—will be more likely to ask questions when they are actually looking at the subject of the safety meeting. Other locations to consider include trenches, scaffolding, aerial lifts and forklifts. Never move to a location that will create a hazard. For instance, don't hold your meeting too close to that crane if it is operating. Examples are great teaching tools,



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but getting yourself crushed by the counterweight of a crane isn't the kind of example you want to use!

### Strategy II: Translate Information into Practice

Safety doesn't happen in the classroom, or during the safety meeting. Accidents and injuries either occur or are avoided on the jobsite where your employees are working. Whenever possible, give your crew a way to quickly put the information from your safety meeting into practice. Using newly acquired knowledge in real-life activities has a double benefit. First, it helps the employees retain and remember the information more completely. Second, it's the first step in translating that information into habitual safe work practices. Adult learners expect the information you're providing to be relevant

## Safety Management Tips:

1. Train regularly and frequently so your employees understand that safety is an everyday part routine.
2. Enforce your safety rules because time spent training on un-enforced rules is time wasted.
3. Whenever possible, train in an environment that helps your employees to learn.
4. Choose topics that are relevant and can be put into practice.
5. Involve your employees by getting something related to the topic in their hands.
6. Follow up when you get questions or comments. Your follow-through will demonstrate your commitment to safety.
7. Document your safety meetings. Employee signatures can be invaluable during inspections and litigation.



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and useful. If it's not useful, you can be sure your crew will soon disregard it.

Choose safety training topics that correspond to the work your crew does and to the hazards that they encounter. If your safety meeting

matches the work your employees do, then they can make a clear connection. You can go one step further by asking questions that require them to verbalize the connection. This technique works especially well when the meeting addresses an issue that

the crew doesn't run into every day, such as severe weather or first aid. At the end of the safety meeting, ask a question like "How do we keep our site prepared in case bad weather strikes?" or "Who knows where the first aid kits are kept?" Questions like these will connect the safety information to the job, improving retention and increasing your return on training.

The timing of your meeting can help the employees translate information into practice. This sounds simple and obvious, but it's easy to overlook. Schedule your safety meetings so that the crew goes back to work immediately afterwards. Don't hold your meeting right before lunch or at the very end of the day. If you put good information in their heads, and then send them home for the night (or even worse, for the weekend), how much can you expect them to remember when they get back to the job? The best time for a safety meeting is early in the day on the first day of the work week. Give them the information they need to work safely and then let them go to work—safely. Your crew is more likely to apply safe work practices to their work when the safety training is fresh in their minds. Applied safe work practices become habitual.

### Strategy III: Take Advantage of Tactile Learners

What does it mean to be a tactile learner? It means that you learn most effectively when you touch, move, handle or manipulate the object you are learning about. Most, though not all, craft and trade workers are predominantly tactile learners. Think about their work and their lives. They spend most of every day working with their hands. For you to capitalize on this trait, you need



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to get something related to the topic into their hands during your safety meetings. This isn't quite as difficult as you may think. There are a lot of opportunities.

Strategy III is easiest to use with toolbox talks that address personal protective equipment. If the topic is hardhats, have the employees inspect their hardhats during the meeting. For example, have the crew look for the ANSI compliance label, check for cracks or try the hat on to make sure it fits properly. Likewise, if the meeting covers hearing protection, bring a new pair of ear plugs for everybody at the meeting. You could even demonstrate how to put them in the ear properly; then, have the crew put them in their ears. Of course, no one will be able to "hear" you after they get the earplugs in their ears, so you'll want to do that at the end of the meeting.

Be creative in your use of strategy III. For a meeting on tools, bring some damaged or defective hand tools, pass them around and see if everyone can identify the problems. When you train on lockout/tagout, bring some locks, tags or lockout devices and hand them to the employees. Hand out copies of a material safety data sheet or samples of Hazardous Material Identification Guide (HMIG) or National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) labels during a meeting on chemical safety.

When it's not practical for everyone to be physically involved, you should use demonstration instead. A good example is a meeting on personal fall arrest systems. You may not want to take the time to have everyone at the meeting put on and take off a fall harness. The practice is great, but it's probably more appropriate in a fall protection training course than a weekly safety meeting. Pick one

“ When it's not practical for everyone to be physically involved, you should use demonstration instead. ”

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person to demonstrate putting the harness on—make sure he or she does it correctly and properly. If you don't have a volunteer in your crew, then at the very least bring the harness and show it to them. Proper lifting techniques, ladder safety and power tools are just a few other topics that will benefit from demonstrations.

### Maximize Your Return on Training

Perhaps you won't be able to use all three strategies in every training session you provide. However, using any of them will have a positive impact on how much information your crew is able to absorb, retain and put into practice. The National Safety Council estimates that the total economic cost of workplace deaths and injuries in 2004 was \$142.2 billion.



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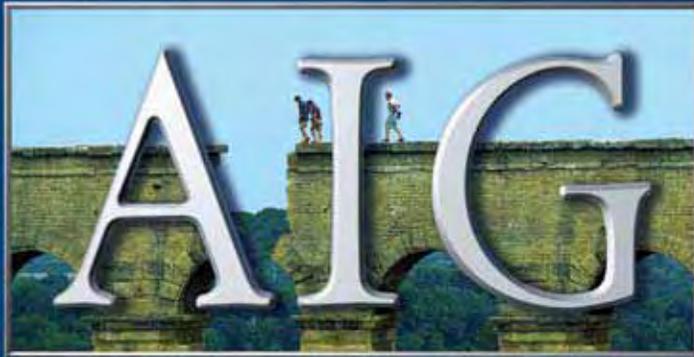
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“ How many accidents occurred in your company last year? How many could have been avoided...” ”

- ▶ How many accidents occurred in your company last year?
- ▶ How many could have been avoided with a heightened awareness of safety in the workplace?
- ▶ What percentage of the billions lost should be in your company's coffers?



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Safety training takes time, and time is money. Train your employees to recognize hazards, explain to them how to handle chemicals safely, remind them to use personal protective equipment and demonstrate safe work practices yourself while using the three strategies presented in this article, and you will maximize the return you get on your safety training time, effort and money.

Remember that the real return on safety training isn't just financial. When your employees work safely throughout the day, they go home to their families safe and in good health. And instead of visiting a long-time employee in the hospital, or explaining to his wife why he'll never walk again, you get to go home, enjoy your evening and sleep well. ■

*Tom Powers is president of Safety Meeting Outlines, Inc., which has been providing Weekly Safety Meetings and Construction & Maintenance Daily Logs to the construction industry for over twenty-five years. Additional information is available at [www.safetymeetingoutlines.com](http://www.safetymeetingoutlines.com) or 888.665.3836. You can reach Tom by e-mail at [tom@safetymeetingoutlines.com](mailto:tom@safetymeetingoutlines.com).*

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