

TRAINING

The Power of Training Trainers

Worldwide experience proves this practice achieves significant safety results.

by Paul McClellan and Robert Pater

While organizations may vary in individual ways, many are beset with a similar time-cost-quality challenge: how to boost safety performance results and employee involvement in a time- and cost-effective manner?

In most industries, there exists a continuous delicate balance of production, morale, and safety. On one hand, it can seem that productivity can conflict directly with safety. Thinning workforces and pressures to do more in a shorter timeframe can lead to temptations to make safety shortcuts. And, as a workforce ages, employees more and more find themselves working harder at 50 than they did at 20.

This scenario can—and frequently does—lead to elevated risk exposures, lowered levels of worker trust and morale, and other reactions that can be costly to everyone.

But, safety, when well implemented, can be a catalyst for enhancing productivity and worker morale. A strategic system of training peer trainers is one powerful approach that can accomplish many objectives simultaneously; this has been proven in many companies, in a wide array of industries, worldwide. It can be an extremely powerful means for reducing injuries, furthering buy-in,

and activating underutilized resources—all leading to boosting safety culture.

Since 1989, we have trained peer-trainers in companies in Australia, Canada, Chile, Dubai, England, France, Germany, Indonesia, Russia, Scotland, Spain, Venezuela, and throughout the United States. The information below is derived from our experience and has been proven successful in a wide range of industries and cultures.

Benefits of Peer Train-the-Trainer Systems

Traditional employee training is like the proverbial little boy: When it is bad, it can be horrid; when it is good, it can be wonderful. Too often, however, we have seen far too much of the former, mixed with a very large dose of the “so-so.”

By design, training offers an excellent opportunity not only to share information, but also to change attitudes, motivation, skills, and behavior. In addition, a strategic peer train-the-trainer system can accomplish much more:

- *Boost credibility* for safety and for the organization. To have a positive impact on safety within a company, it is important

that employees feel the approaches and strategies used are useful and sincere. When well selected, peer trainers have credibility and respect of their peers going in. When they then are trained in a process in which they see value, they can further spread credibility throughout the company.

- *Strengthen buy-in.* In order to get buy-in, it is critical that workers feel a sense of ownership and control. One way to accomplish this is by utilizing the talents and experience of line staff, recruiting them as trainers and facilitators.

- *Enhance involvement.* Many organizations understand the power of employee involvement for eliciting ideas and elevating receptivity to change. The act of selecting and training peer trainers is an involvement process in itself. Then, when these peer trainers are “deputized” to serve as agents of safety change, they will further enlist others to become more involved in safety, in different ways. Peer trainers often carry a high level of credibility, especially long-term employees who have spent many years in both the company and their respective jobs.

- *Offload managers and safety professionals.* A strategic peer train-the-trainer system can lighten the load for busy managers seeking to go to the next level in safety performance.

- *Generate more effective solutions to long-standing safety issues.* Peer trainers are usually the closest to the problems that occur on the floor and therefore have a genuine personal interest in the solutions.

- *Develop “expert systems.”* How often has valuable information been lost when seasoned workers retire or move on for other reasons? With them often goes knowledge of subtle work methods for doing tasks highly efficiently, safely, and with strong

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quality. If this information is passed on, it can add to the effectiveness and potential profitability of the company.

- *Recognition.* Selecting the “right” people to become peer trainers/safety change agents also validates employees who have ultimately contributed their most important nonrenewable resource to the company: their time. This can boost motivation and loyalty of these valued workers, as well as that of their peers who watch this process.

- *Time efficient.* Because they are part of the workforce, peer trainers are usually more available for ongoing informal coaching and reinforcement on the floor. And, typically, they have more time available to remind and persuade their peers than do roving and over-pressed safety professionals, who often are working even thinner than line staff.

- *Reduce organizational stress.* We define stress as “the feeling of being out of control.” To a sometimes significant degree, a peer train-the-trainer process provides another element of control to the workforce, as well as validating the expertise of line staff.

- *Reinforcement.* In essence, peer trainers also become living and moving posters for safety. Their presence acts as a reminder to those around them, who associate the instructor with the subject matter.

- *Availability for scheduling—and to train new hires as they come aboard.* Relying on an outside source of expertise usually results in some workers missing training because of illness, vacation, work scheduling, or other reasons. Peer trainers may be available to do impromptu catch-up sessions, train those who missed a previously scheduled seminar, or work with new hires and/or temporary workers. All with minimal costs and logistical planning that would otherwise be required, were an outside trainer brought in.

- * *Cost efficient.* Instruction and expertise are developed and kept within the organization. With thoughtful implementation, the cost of training instructors internally is returned over time in many ways. Developing expertise internally also limits dependence on outside sources, again adding to overall efficiency.

- * *Impact an organization’s overall culture.* Done conscientiously, with proper support and planning, routine training can

be transformed into a powerful tool for continuous change that is useful on many levels. And effectively utilizing peer trainers also makes it more likely that all workers—those who originally might have missed a one-time training event and new hires as they come aboard—are trained in the same approach. This boosts internal consistency, unifies expectations, and strengthens culture.

Initial Steps

Getting the maximum benefits of a strategic train-the-trainer process requires careful planning and sincere support from all those involved. In our experience of training more than 20,000 peer trainers worldwide, some critical first steps are:

- *Management needs to stay involved.* A consensus of leadership on the plan is the first step. When senior pressure rolls down the hill, it is more likely that mid-managers and supervisors will support something they see as beneficial.

- *Management leads, not just supports.* Once a plan has been decided upon, a management representative—ideally, one as high in the organization’s ranks as possible—should be selected to champion the actual implementation. Such coordinators/ champions should first be dedicated to being a focal point for significant and lasting improvements in safety performance and culture. They should second have a position high enough to direct support staff to arrange logistics, rooms, schedules, audiovisual equipment, photocopying of evaluation masters, etc. Third, they should have credibility with peer trainer candidates as well as with senior management and mid-management. Fourth, they should have available time to meet regularly (at least monthly) with peer trainers as a group, as well as being receptive to contacting peer trainers for check-in. Fifth, we find it most effective when the coordinator/champion also participates as fully as possible in the peer train-the-trainer process so that they best understand program content and strategic objectives.

Employee leadership has to be activated. In organizations without bargaining units, appropriate employee leadership—safety committees and/or informal employee leaders—should be brought in as early as possible to alert them to the proposed plan and to invite their input. These leaders are ideal candidates for becoming acknowledged and trained peer-trainers.

Where there is a bargaining unit, the peer train-the-trainer process can be a powerful vehicle for improving or maintaining good relations between management and unions. Most can be gained if the process is truly a joined effort from everyone in the organization. Unions should be included in every step of the process. From the outset, union leaders should be consulted and kept informed. The peer trainers, of course, probably will be members of the union.

The selection of the trainers is one of the most important elements to be considered. Here are some criteria to keep in mind. Candidates for peer trainers should:

- Be respected by their co-workers. Peer trainers should be selected from among the informal employee leaders in the company.
- Have a positive interest in employee safety and workers’ satisfaction.
- Understand clearly what is being asked of them and show an interest in the process.
- Be in a good position in terms of their job and working hours to deliver and follow up the training.
- Want the assignment, even if they are initially uncomfortable or unconfident about the prospect of their training their peers.
- Have sufficiently strong communication skills—in the language in which the training will be presented—to understand the training and to disseminate it to their peers.
- Be representative of their peers. Peer trainers should be selected from a range of functions (shop floor, outside workers, office staff), age, and experience groups, as well as mix of gender and

representative of the workplace. For example, if there are three subgroups of cultures (e.g., nationalities), it is critical to make sure peer trainers are selected from these groups.

Peer Train-the-Trainer Action Plan

Once the decision has been made to implement the peer train-the-trainer system, preplanning has been done, and receptivity created, the next step is to train the instructor candidates. Some things to keep in mind when designing this process are:

- *Make sure training is customized to the actual tasks and culture of the plant/organization.* This makes the training more digestible and easier to quickly put into use. It furthers credibility for the process.
- *Train-the-trainer information and methods should be practical and usable.* Training should address actual work tasks, tools, and processes, rather than theoretical or ideal conditions.
- *Peer trainer candidates have to learn to use the information and methods themselves first and to a high degree, because they will be acting as role models and on-site coaches.* It is difficult to teach what you cannot do. But too often, we live in a world where those who cannot do teach what they know only in a very superficial way. Contrarily, to be effective peer trainers, people have to learn to be at a much higher level of knowledge and skills themselves—above and beyond what they will teach, coach, and reinforce. This way, they are much more likely to be prepared to answer “unusual” but important questions, adapt principles to new situations, and be seen to actually be using methods taught in training themselves in many circumstances. These are critical components for enhancing credibility and behavioral change.
- *Trainers should be trained to deliver the information in ways that are beneficial to employees both at work and at home.* We have found this significantly maximizes employee receptivity to the training material. Principles as well as techniques should be stressed so the information can apply to a wide variety of tasks. The trainers should know not just what the information is, but also why. This will facilitate the transference of information, as well as give a deeper understanding of the application of the material.

• *The train-the-trainer design should stress high-level presentation and communication skills.* One of the main strengths of peer training is its down to earth/easily accepted and minimally resisted approach. Participants should be allowed to develop a presentation style that is professional yet casual and enlists the positive elements of their personal style. The train-the-trainer atmosphere should be open and relaxed. During their own training, peer trainer participants should be challenged but never put on the spot.

Seven Keys for Trainers Training Peers

The courses that peer trainers deliver should take place as soon after the train-the-trainer session as possible. This will help ensure the information will still be fresh and peer trainers' motivation will be high.

Trainers initially should work in pairs, if logistics allow. This will help boost confidence and help create a higher trainer-participant ratio that enhances contact. And it makes it more likely that trainers will present all critical training methods (when two are remembering, less will be lost).

Classes should be kept to a reasonable size and conducted at times when the students are fresh. In contrast, training classes conducted after a long midnight shift will be of limited value.

Expectations should be set that the training will be followed up. Multiple exposures to the information will help make it much more likely it is understood and utilized by employees.

The training should be split between classroom instruction and practical, hands-on activities, whenever possible. The practical portion should represent the workers' tasks as realistically as possible, with the tools they use, in actual work settings.

The information should be presented in a concise manner and be able to be applied as quickly and easily as possible.

There should be a predetermined system for reinforcement and

follow-up. This can include, but not be limited to, a range of polls to determine use of training methods, visual reminders (signs, etc.), personal items (clothes, things that people carry that include key messages of the training), recognition methods for those who have successfully applied training techniques, written follow-up (company newsletters), refresher training, and much more. It works best when the peer trainers themselves select and implement a reinforcement and follow-up system.

A strategic system of training peer trainers has been shown to be a powerful vehicle for breaking through longstanding obstacles to higher safety performance. When planned and implemented well, a peer train-the-trainer system can greatly reduce injuries and boost involvement and morale in a leveraged, time- and cost-effective way.

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