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The language barrier is not a safety barrier

26 July, 2012 Chris Poole 3 comments

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OHS professionals understand better than most the challenges of risk management and mitigation. Often they have arrived via other roles in the trades, project management or engineering where risk management runs like rio through everything they do.

Risk management can be analysed to fine resolution – to individual accidents or incidents; their immediate circumstances, the “shaping” factors and more distantly the generalised behaviours or design issues that give rise to them. So we develop specific countermeasures or mechanisms that minimise or even remove the risk.

But what if this analysis is defective? What if there remains a “management blind spot”, where there is no data, no transparent processes, no validated mechanisms or measures? Just wishful thinking and a broom to sweep the problems under the rug? That black hole is called “language”.

Getting them started

Australia is a multilingual society. We have long-term unskilled and semi-skilled workers arriving and contributing to our economy from countries with low literacy in their native languages and none in English. In addition to this we have the greater danger of short-stay OEM engineers and advisors working on installations, shutdowns and repairs.

Why are these the greater danger? Because they are in unfamiliar, rapidly changing environments that by definition are frantic with non-standard, high-pressure work procedures. Research has shown that this environment presents the highest level of risk for mistakes, near-misses and ultimately accidents and injury.

So what mechanisms are in place to manage risk in this environment? Let’s start with just English speakers and let’s just look at one mechanism: site inductions.

These are generally interactive processes that seek to obtain rapid acclimatisation to an unfamiliar and constantly changing workplace full of hazards. They often rely on a safety officer who, as well being fully conversant in legislation, company policy, the use of safety equipment and so on, will also have a confident and engaging manner, sense of humour and an ability to have the trainees identify with him or her.

This is important. Trainers are not just reciting a script. Their job is not done until they have achieved a level of behavioural change that will significantly minimise the risks to which each trainee will be exposed, and will minimise the exposure of the company to the risk of cost and litigation. Not only do they need to impart the knowledge and awareness that will drive behavioural



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change in the trainees, but they need to confirm that they have done this.

Communication is critical in this setting. The core skill of a trainer is perhaps their spoken presentation. But this must be supported with a number of other devices such as overheads that employ both graphics, text and video materials, hand-outs to be read before or after, actual examples of fire extinguishers and hazardous substances, audience participation such as dialogue, mock rescues or blindfold tests, and of course the test at the end (although computer based inductions are perhaps overly reliant on this last one).

Like pulling teeth...

But let's drill down further. During an induction – which can last many hours – the trainer employs many other mechanisms that are almost subliminal forms of communication: eye contact, rising inflection, affirmative suffixes, all of these things enable him or her to monitor the level of engagement of the audience. The trainer will look for signs that they are going too fast or slow, or for people who may not be able to keep up with the rest. Most of all they will ask questions and invite the audience to do the same. Here we come to a significant barrier.

To put it delicately, trainees in safety inductions to industrial sites are not necessarily a demographic that has chosen to devote their lives to classroom-based memory challenges and public speaking. It is well appreciated by OHS trainers that in order to get the message across it is often necessary to reassure the participants that the test will not be too hard, the day not too formal, and that they haven't mysteriously ended up back in the oppressive environment of the school room they happily left behind all those years ago.

Even if the trainer successfully gets everyone to relax, it is still by no means easy to get people to ask questions. The youngsters feel constrained by their elders and vice versa. Few people will speak up unless they feel that doing so will enhance their standing or at least will not embarrass them. Putting a hand up in front of bunch of mates or even worse, strangers, can be very confronting. Yet it is precisely this piece of information that the trainer needs to know in order for him or her to validate the induction process itself.

More than anything else, a trainer needs to have the concepts that they have presented, come back to them in the trainees' own words to truly confirm that they have understood.

However it is not uncommon for people to *pretend* they've understood just to get on with it. All trainers are in a difficult position here. On the one hand, they don't want to put people on the spot because they don't want to lose engagement, but on the other hand, it is their responsibility to manage risks of injury, capital loss and financial penalties.

Our overseas visitors

Now let's look at the larger problem: people whose first language is not English. Awareness of the language barrier is evident in the legislation, and people know that translation services are possible. But do people call on these services as readily as they would call an electrician when they find an electrical fault? Let's look at some of the psychological obstacles.

If you ask a person with limited English "Do you understand English?" they may well answer "Yes, I understand." That's an easy question they have probably heard many times before, and quite often they are under pressure to please – the questioner, their boss, their company.

Once they have committed to this though, they often find that they understand very little of what follows. They are now in a double bind because it would be embarrassing to back down.

The relationship then starts to resemble the blind leading the blind. They smile and nod, leading the trainer to think they understand the English presentation.

If they produce a string of English words in response to a prompt from the trainer this reinforces the trainer's impression that they are OK with English. Even though the trainer has no way of knowing whether their poorly formed English is an accurate or complete expression of their question or answer. It's just "English" and trainers themselves are under pressure to be satisfied with that.

Any system of checks and balances has broken down here. Just like an English speaker, a non-English speaker will attempt to say only those things which they can say with confidence. This often leaves all the things they *want and need* to say, unsaid, because these are beyond their level of English proficiency and they don't want to look stupid in front of a roomful of fluent English speakers. When this happens no one's the wiser.

The dangers

English speakers completely under-estimate the pressure on non-English speakers, and the results are not trivial. In our work as translators we have had to blow the whistle on one overseas supplier who had worked out a way for all their visiting supervisors to circumvent the interactive site induction. Ironically once on site the safety officer had said to us "I don't know why they need interpreters – they pass their induction just fine!"

We had to do this because once we were aware of the cheating, it was an unacceptable risk for us to be complicit in a practice that completely undermined the legal protection that one of our major clients *thought* they enjoyed.

On another occasion we happened to join and observe a meeting to deal with a major safety issue and the non-English speaker was asked a question in the form of "Was this before or after X?" and he answered "Yes!" At this point people realised that the whole meeting to that point had been a waste, and they had to repeat the entire discussion, only this time we translated.

Even asking a person if they would like a translator can put them on the spot and there will be strong motives for them to say "No", especially if their work colleagues are present. It is like asking if they have an STD. They are not trained or competent to measure such things objectively, and even if they were, and had, there are powerful social constraints that prevent them from answering honestly.

The end result of all of these psychological obstacles is that for all the preparation of training materials, case studies, for all the blokey bonding that a trainer can use to get the message across, the entire process stops dead at a smiling and yet uncomprehending face.

No behaviour has been modified, the legislative obligation to give clear instructions has not been fulfilled, the safety and integrity of person and plant is needlessly endangered, and companies are exposed to the risk of litigation or prosecution.

Site inductions are just one example of course. There is also specialist training, toolbox meetings, signage, written instruction and incident investigation. All can be hampered by the language barrier and objective, quantified answers must be sought to questions like: Is the communication process functioning? If not, do we need to adopt other methods? Are those methods effective?

We should treat these issues dispassionately as though we were testing a piece of equipment. We must establish acceptable benchmarks, measure outcomes, act when there is a shortfall, and not let our decisions be smothered by considerations of personal feelings or cultural sensitivities. There is too much at stake.

About the author: Chris Poole is the manager of Chris Poole Translation

Images courtesy of the author.

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[Join the discussion...](#)**Sandy** · 3 years ago

In the construction industry you are required to hold a White Card. In order to get a White Card or High Risk Licence you must be able to use English at a level that enables the safe performance of the work. So if you don't have a good grasp on English then you put yourself and others at risk. It's not about being racist, it's about being safe. If you call out a warning to a person who simply smiles and nods in response because they have no idea what you are saying, then someone could be seriously injured or even killed as a result. Never mind translators. If the person needs a translator then that should be ringing alarm bells.

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Establishing effective communication skills should be part of every recruitment process, Allowances can be made for someone with poor reading and writing skills, but a lack of basic understanding of the spoken English language and as a result Work site safety requirements will prevent someone from effectively adhering to both company and legislative safety requirements, which will expose not only them but their fellow staff and the company to risk. I work for an organisation which has a large number of professionals that speak English as a second language (note I wrote second language all had gone through the recruitment process and had established their English proficiency) and have no problems working with such people as a fresh prospective can enliven an organisation. However there is significant risk with trying to be a Good Samaritan and employing those unable to effectively integrate into an organisation due to a lack of English language skills. Unless your company is geared at and able to have translators on staff to supervise 27/7 those unable to effectively communicate with others in the organisation, employing those unable to communicate with others on the job site is not a risk I would recommended to any company that I am employed by.

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I think lack of knowledge and understanding of this issue, as well as the attitude to this issue is a huge 'management blind spot'.

As a safety trainer, I have on a number of occasions had employers pressure me to 'pass' someone who was not proficient in english on courses that required english comprehension as a required skill/knowledge. A huge brickbat to them.

On the other hand, we've also had employers who've taken the line of 'not on my worksite' and happily said to people with poor english that they no longer had a job, or did not get any further through the recruiting process. One in particular goes as far as marlins testing prior to sending them to us for safety training. A big plus for them in my book.

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