



# Safety connection

## An expert shares strategies for successful communication

By Melanie Mesaros

In front of a classroom of 90 people at the Oregon Governor's Occupational Safety & Health Conference in March, Dan Miller gestures as he moves around the room, prompting participants to share how they felt after a listening exercise. Some attendees key in on body language, while others say their approach changes when they knew they weren't being heard.

"The first place one must focus on is the art of listening," said Miller, a consultant who specializes in leadership strategies. Miller is also a former safety director and human resources manager with more than 45 years of experience.

He said most of listening is reactive, which can lead you into a defensive and argumentative posture, especially when someone is presenting you with criticism. When these relationships break down, information is withheld and drama between individuals can escalate.

"You often hear, 'the safety committee isn't doing anything – they're lazy, rude, or ineffective,'" he said.

**Above:** Dan Miller, who specializes in leadership strategies, said listening and asking questions can help you deal with conflict.



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But, as he points out, that kind of feedback does not help safety managers or safety committees address what is really wrong.

"You have to get into the specifics about their situation," he said. "First, take big, deep breaths so you don't get into a reactive state. Then, ask for specifics about their situation. (What was said or done? What did you hear or see?) If you ask for specifics and they are still too upset to give them, start guessing."

Miller said once you are able to key in on specifics, it's important to repeat back to the person what you heard and acknowledge their perception. You may find that you own part of the problem, too.



Miller said successful safety cultures can't exist without employee involvement.

"One of the pitfalls can be trying to go solve the issue before getting the specifics," Miller said. "Many times, people present a surface problem, but there's really more underneath."

He said this model can often help safety leaders get at what's really going on in the culture.

"A key factor to safety success is the ability to involve, engage, and participate," he said. "Often, a company's problem is about inclusion. People want to contribute. Organizations that create systems where people have opportunities to get involved improve safety performance."



GOSH Conference attendees practice techniques for listening and asking questions during Miller's session.



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Miller believes part of inviting participation begins with training and education.

“Effective safety committee members need people-skills training,” he said. “By giving them the communication skills and knowledge they need, you also give them the tools to be successful.”

Miller said it is just as important to practice what he calls “full loop communication” – that is, following up on the items employees bring forward.

“Get back to people,” he said. “If you don’t give people full loop communication, you aren’t going to get much participation or engagement.” ■

## Dan Miller’s six-step model to responding to criticism

1. Acknowledge facts and feelings
2. Ask for specifics  
(What did you see or hear?)
3. Guess for specifics (if the person isn’t able to provide them)
4. Summarize what you heard  
(focus on the issue, not the person)
5. Acknowledge the other person’s perception, but you don’t need to agree
6. Own your part of the situation



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