

Howard Talks Tech

Are you Safety Literate?



Most dictionaries define **literacy** as the ability to read and write. Today that definition has been expanded, and many now consider literacy to be the ability to locate, evaluate, use, and communicate using a wide range of resources including text, visual, audio, and video sources. In broad terms, **literacy is the ability to make and communicate meaning from and by the use of a variety of socially contextual symbols**; a literate person can derive and

convey meaning, and use their knowledge to achieve a desired goal that requires the use of language skill.

A contemporary definition of **safety** defines it as follows: “Freedom from whatever exposes one to danger or from liability to cause danger or harm”.

So why do I ask the question about safety literacy? Safety is a very laudable goal. Few people want to risk getting hurt or see anyone else get hurt. The challenge is how do we bring about that state?

Safety is a very broad term and as such is a social construct. A social construct is an idea or concept that people have built, and then they organize their actions and thoughts around it.

While we all may agree that “safety” is important, we have various ideas about what it is and how we should organize our actions to bring it about. So “safety literacy” is the ability to locate, evaluate, use and communicate concepts which when shared allows each of us to derive a similar meaning and then use that knowledge to behave in such a way as to achieve freedom from danger.

Remember; danger is actions that increase the risk of contacting a hazard. A machete has a hazardously sharp edge. Our action of wildly swinging the machete is what is dangerous.

I feel that all safety practitioners need to be literate in several languages; the language of finance to obtain resources; the language of management to gain approval for our programs; and the language of the worker to influence their behavior. We must recognize the apparent cognitive dissonance between our thoughts and those perceptions of each audience member. We need to persuade each, while maintaining their respect and most importantly not compromising on our core beliefs for the sake of silencing our critics.

Our core message is that everyone has the right to work in an environment that enhances safety and return home unharmed by the duties of their employment. But in the 21st century we have to stretch our beliefs to include employing the new technologies of communication. We must be safety literate.

These talks are distributed with the hope that they spark some dialog. Feel free to use them as the basis for a tool box talk with your colleagues, clients, safety committee members or employees.

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