



Lost in Translation: Safety Communication in the Rail Industry

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Background

The Short Line Safety Institute (SLSI) conducts voluntary, non-punitive, and confidential assessments of the safety culture at participating short line and regional freight railroads (i.e., Class II and Class III railroads) across the United States. SLSI also conducts an annual Systematic Review of the assessed railroads to measure industry trends and identify opportunities for improvement in safety culture. Results of the 2020 Systematic Review suggest that both the quality and quantity of railroad safety communication can be improved. In response to these findings, SLSI launched a Safety Poster Program which provides interested railroads with safety posters on a quarterly basis free of charge. SLSI also aims to assist railroads with other aspects of their safety communication quality and quantity, such as possible barriers to effective communication. Thus, the goals of this current paper are to highlight potential obstacles associated with safety communication, provide tips on how to overcome the obstacles, and educate the industry on the importance of clear and frequent safety communication.

Introduction

George Bernard Shaw has said that “the single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that is has taken place.” In an industry where safety must be prioritized over competing demands, it is imperative that all safety communication is as clear and effective as possible. Communication between railroaders is often riddled with acronyms, initialisms, code numbers, and industry jargon. These may include “dog law,” “snaked head,” and “hook”. While the use of these abbreviations is intended to expedite communication¹ and reinforce a sense of belonging among employees,² it often in fact becomes a barrier to communication.³ Below are potential obstacles associated with different safety communications and tips on how to address these obstacles. This list is not exhaustive. It is intended to keep clear and effective communication at the forefront of all railroaders’ safety practices.

¹ Brubaker, R. F., & Brubaker, J. H. (1999). Does somebody else out there hate acronyms?. *Archives of Ophthalmology*, 117, 701-702.

² Church-Morel, A., & Bartel-Radic, A. (2016). Skills, Identity, and Power: The Multifaceted Concept of Language Diversity. *Management International / International Management / Gestión Internacional*, 21, 12-24.

³ Hales, A. H., Williams, K. D., & Rector, J. (2017). Alienating the audience: How abbreviations hamper scientific communication. *APS Observer*, 30.

Obstacle: *Language-Based Exclusion*

The frequent use of acronyms and abbreviations in safety communications can be perceived as exclusionary by any listener that is not “fluent” in those abbreviations. In other words, an employee may feel that others are speaking in an abbreviation “language” in attempt to keep him or her “out of the loop”. Language-based exclusion⁴ can have a variety of negative effects including employees being less willing to be helpful on the job, less satisfied with their coworkers, and feeling more rejection and anger.⁵

Tip: *Define All Abbreviations*

It is important to remember that “even well-intentioned writers and speakers may overestimate an audiences’ familiarity with abbreviations”.⁶ When writing or speaking a safety communication, define the abbreviation the first time it is used (where appropriate). This action will increase the communication quality while also preventing any unintentional perceptions of language-based exclusion. Moving even beyond this tip, try using less abbreviations in general (where appropriate). An oversaturation of acronyms and codes can turn a safety communication into alphabet soup.

Obstacle: *Use of Different Terminology/Hand Signals*

Railroaders eventually become proficient in the industry-related language they use on the job. This language creates a community of people who are united by their profession.⁷ However, railroaders may use different terms or hand signals for the same thing depending on where and how they were trained on the topic. For example, one person may say “in-between” and another say “red-zone” when entering into the foul of rolling stock. Such inconsistencies in communication could lead to confusion, conflict, or an incident. They may also lead to an unintentional divide among former employees of different railroads, thus creating an “us” versus “them” dynamic at the current railroad.⁸

Tip: *Safety Communication Training*

It is crucial for employees of the same organization to speak the same “language” or “company speak”.⁹ This may be achieved through a safety communication training in which all employees would learn the

⁴ Kulkarni, M., & Sommer, K. (2014). Language-based exclusion and prosocial behaviors in organizations. *Human Resource Management, 54*, 637-652.

⁵ Dotan-Eliasz, O., Sommer, K. L., & Rubin, Y. S. (2009). Multilingual groups: Effects of linguistic ostracism on felt rejection and anger, coworker attraction, perceived team potency, and creative performance. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 31*, 363-375.

⁶ Hales, A. H., Williams, K. D., & Rector, J. (2017). Alienating the audience: How abbreviations hamper scientific communication. *APS Observer, 30*.

⁷ Welch, D., Welch, L., & Piekkari, R. (2005). Speaking in tongues: The importance of language in international management processes. *International Studies of Management & Organization, 35*, 10-27.

⁸ Church-Morel, A., & Bartel-Radic, A. (2016). Skills, Identity, and Power: The Multifaceted Concept of Language Diversity. *Management International / International Management / Gestión Internacional, 21*, 12-24.

⁹ Vecchi, D. D. (2014). Company-speak: an inside perspective on corporate language. *Global Business and Organizational Excellence, 33*, 64-74.

proper terminology and signals to be used on the job. Not only could this unify and bond the employees, it could also alleviate misunderstandings and miscommunications.

Obstacle: *Silencing*

If an abbreviation used in a safety communication is not yet “second language” to the listener, he or she is then tasked with deciphering what it may mean. A potentially dangerous scenario is one in which the listener cannot determine the abbreviation’s meaning, but is too embarrassed or intimidated to ask for clarification, which is also known as “silencing”.¹⁰ It is at this exact moment that the safety communication is now lost and is subject to misinterpretation or even dismissal.

Tip: *Create an Environment of Respect*

Silencing is less likely to occur in a respectful work environment that is free of judgment. If an employee perceives that he or she will not be mocked or punished for not knowing an industry abbreviation or jargon, he or she can feel comfortable asking for its definition. An environment of respect can foster more frequent and better-quality communication.

Conclusion: *Clear, Concise, and Effective*

Clear- Define abbreviations the first time they are used in a safety communication (where appropriate). Train employees on the proper terminology to be used so everyone is speaking the same “language”.

Concise- Do not have a safety communication riddled with acronyms and jargon (where appropriate). Although these are intended to expedite communication, they often blur the original message.

Effective- When communicating safety messages with employees, check for understanding. A safety communication is not effective if the listener does not understand the message. Do not assume the audience understands all rail industry jargon and abbreviations. Create an environment where employees feel comfortable asking questions if necessary.

¹⁰ Piekkari, R., Oxelheim, L., & Randøy, T. (2015). The silent board: How language diversity may influence the work processes of corporate boards. *Corporate Governance: An International Review*, 23, 25-41.

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