

Adult Safety Training and Mentoring

"Their most memorable learning came from personal experiences, from working within groups of other adult learners, and from mentoring they received from someone they perceived to be both knowledgeable and wise."

These are only two of the important insights contained in the report of a research project conducted by NIOSH, *"Tell Me a Story: Why Stories are Essential to Effective Safety Training"*. The project produced seven safety videos using miners to deliver their stories on the dangers inherent in their work, and lessons they had learned to keep themselves safe. At the beginning of the project, however, the researchers took lessons from research on adult learning behaviors; the comments below are taken from that universal knowledge base.

The "case" starts with the realization that adults learn differently than the ways that children learn. Adults are pragmatic in their learning. They will not put energy into learning that does not appear relevant to their lives. Adults need to know why they need to learn something, and they must be ready and motivated to learn. They have to see the training as valuable. This insight into adult learning is at odds with current safety training, which is all too often the talking-head variety, with the trainer in front of a classroom and the trainees sitting and listening passively. Adults in any working community are likely to be resistant to changes suggested by outside safety "experts". They may change their behavior to comply with mandated rules when a supervisor is watching, but when monitoring is not taking place, they often revert to their old habits.

Mentors, on the other hand, have a basic level of credibility because of their age and length of experience; they are generally admired and respected, and they can play key roles in training and teaching new employees. They also have stories to tell. A mentor knows what is important, how to do things right, and "how things are done around here," including unsafe acts and omissions.

Mentoring of new employees by older employees takes place on an informal basis in just about every organization. Without direction, however, that mentoring can be limited to "this is the way we do things around here" mode, including shortcuts and unsafe acts. Why not assign a respected senior employee the responsibility, and honor, of helping new hires to understand the how's and why's of safety rules along with their experience and stories? Why not find ways for those senior employees to tell stories about their mishaps and near misses at safety meetings? Stories have great potential to influence behavior. They entertain, as well as show what others would do when faced with a certain set of circumstances.

References

Tell me a Story: Why Stories are Essential to Effective Safety Training. Elaine T. Cullen and Albert H. Fein, August 2005. See NIOSH website: www.cdc.gov/niosh.