Empirical Research on Safety Meetings – Things You Ought To Know!
By Deb Potter, PhD

I’ve had the unique experience of traveling across the country during the past year with Carl Potter, who you may know is my husband and business partner. Carl has been busy presenting his program “Who is Responsible for Safety?” to hundreds of workers across the country. I’ve noticed some phenomena and, as a researcher, I cannot help but make some intelligent interpretations, which I feel compelled to share with you.

I’ve been doing what researchers call “action research” during the past several months. Action research is done by a trained researcher who is observing what is going on in groups. In my research the participants didn’t even know I was observing them. And, I’ll admit my study was a bit unscientific, but nonetheless I must share my observations with you.

First, 8 out of 10 workers think that a safety meeting is not worth coming to unless someone brings donuts. I have several ideas about the meaning of this observation. Perhaps safety meetings are considered not worth coming to unless food is involved, particularly for meetings that occur early in the day. Another thought is that managers and supervisors think that employees will be more likely to attend the meeting with a donut as an incentive. Or, maybe workers just need that “sugar fix” to keep them awake.

Second, in 48 out of 50 safety meetings that I have attended, at least one person is present who arrives early so as to acquire the seat in the furthest corner from the speaker. If the seat is not near a corner of the room or at least one wall, the person will move the chair so he can lean the chair back on two legs while sitting with arms crossed, cap pulled down low, with sunglasses on. Occasionally, more than one person will assume the position. After discussing this particular observation with Carl, my interpretation is that the person or persons wants to clearly communicate that the attendance in this meeting is under great duress and the person does not believe the time is well spent.

Third, in a majority of the meetings, cell phones ring and people answer them, holding conversations while the rest of the attendees attempt to maintain their focus on the topic of the meeting. In a few cases, the cell-phone-culprit has been the manager in charge of the
meeting. In other cases, it has been a crew leader or general foreman. In one case, a “gentleman” sitting next to me at a late afternoon meeting took a call presumably from his spouse and conversed about who would pick up the kids after work and even discussed the time of a ball game. My interpretation of this type of activity is that other business is so important that cell phones cannot possibly be turned off for one hour.

It’s really quite amazing when I think about what I’ve seen. Sometimes it seems like there are many employees interested in attending their safety meetings, yet often many seem to think it is an imposition on their time. Is that why someone would wear sunglasses to a safety meeting? Or maybe I need to do more research. Perhaps one out of twenty five outdoor workers suffers some malady that causes them to need to wear sunglasses indoors. And maybe there is a reason that people lean back in their chairs so only two of four legs are on the ground. (Does this constitute improper use of equipment? Has anyone ever been injured during a safety meeting by falling off of their chair?). And has the emphasis on health along with safety caused the decline in the provision of donuts at safety meetings, or is it just the aftermath of the Atkins craze? I definitely need to do more research!

In all seriousness, if you are an employee who attends safety meetings, think about why you are in the meeting the next time you go. Your company does not have to provide such meetings, but many do so to provide employees with a forum for learning and sharing information. If you find the meetings boring – and many are – get involved and help make them more interesting and meaningful. Now if you are a manager, a supervisor, or a front-line leader, take note.

Research shows that managers set the tone for the safety culture in an organization and much of that culture is developed during safety meetings. After all, in some industries, particularly where the workforce is mobile, a safety meeting may be the only time a manager or supervisor has everyone together. If you start a safety meeting with a statement like, “Listen up, this won’t take long,” you are making safety unimportant. Think about how you start your meetings.

Not long ago, I went with Carl while he made a presentation to a client’s employees. The manager that invited us in did a great job of kicking off the meeting. With his cell phone in hand, he said “This meeting is so important that I’m going to turn my cell phone off. I’d encourage you to do the same. I’ve arranged for the dispatcher to
take all of our calls this morning. He knows that if there is an
emergency, he is to call Tom’s cell phone. Tom is in the meeting too
and he has his cell phone on vibrate. Tom will take any calls that the
dispatcher can’t handle himself. Tom will let you know if you are
needed on any emergencies the dispatcher can’t handle. Now, I’m
going to stay in this meeting because I think safety is important and I
hope you do too. I’m going to listen to what Carl has to say because it
may save my life or yours.” He went on to introduce Carl. It was
amazing what that simple introduction did to the tone of the meeting.

Carl and I hope that you’ll think about what this research means to
you and do what you can to improve the quality of your safety
meetings. It may take something as simple as an improved attitude
on your part to make them better. And what you hear may save your
life.

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Carl Potter, CSP, CMC and Deb Potter, PhD, CMC work with
organizations that target a zero-injury workplace so everyone can go
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