

Effective OHS communication: supporting worker understanding and participation

OHS information for employers and supervisors

Introduction

Alberta's *Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act* assigns duties to regulated work site parties, including employers and supervisors. For example:

- Employers must ensure workplaces are healthy and safe. This includes making sure workers understand their rights to:
 - **Know** about hazards.
 - **Participate** in health and safety.
 - **Refuse** dangerous work.
- Supervisors have specific responsibilities for the workers they supervise. These include telling workers under their supervision about all known or possible hazards in the work area.

When everyone understands rights and responsibilities and actively participates, it strengthens health and safety culture across the workplace.

Learn more about occupational health and safety rights, responsibilities and participation in the “Guide to OHS” booklets and the internal responsibility system bulletin listed in the [For more information](#) section of this resource.

Alberta workplaces include workers with different levels of experience, training, language proficiency and familiarity with workplace health and safety requirements. Some workers may be new to Alberta's workplace requirements, reporting processes or health and safety practices.

Effective communication helps ensure workers understand hazards, follow safe work procedures and participate in health and safety activities. This supports compliance with occupational health and safety requirements and helps prevent workplace illnesses and injuries.

Factors that can affect understanding of OHS information

Workers may understand and respond to health and safety information differently depending on their experience, training and familiarity with workplace processes. These factors can affect how workers understand instructions, recognize hazards, take part in health and safety talks or use reporting systems. For example:

- Previous experiences in workplaces, institutions or organizations can reduce a worker's comfort with formal reporting or health and safety conversations.
- Learning a new language, Alberta's workplace systems, common workplace abbreviations or informal terms take time.
- Moving between jobs may mean using different health and safety practices from previous or other concurrent workplaces.
- Workers may understand information differently. Visual, verbal, written and hands-on instruction can all support learning.

These factors shape how workers interact with supervisors, ask questions or take part in health and safety discussions (for example, some workers may wait to be invited to speak or may not be comfortable speaking in a group setting). Silence or agreement does not always mean understanding.

In the workplace, this can look like:

- A worker notices a hazard but stays quiet because they don't know who to tell or worry about how it will affect their job.
- A worker agrees during safety training to avoid looking inexperienced, even though they did not fully understand the instructions.
- A worker hesitates to ask for help because a previous supervisor discouraged questions.

Potential barriers

- Workers may be unsure how to raise a concern or how it might affect their job.
- Formal reporting processes can be difficult to use when workers are unfamiliar with them.
- Entry-level, temporary or seasonal roles may provide fewer opportunities for workers to become familiar with workplace reporting processes, reducing learning momentum and confidence.
- Past workplaces where supervisors ignored concerns can make it harder for a worker to raise an issue again.
- Workers and supervisors may experience communication barriers even when they speak the same language. Differences in workplace vocabulary, familiarity with workplace expressions, accents, pronunciation or speech patterns can affect understanding.

Workplace hierarchy, uncertainty about reporting processes and previous negative experiences can all increase a worker's hesitation to speak up, even when hazards are present.

Under Alberta's OHS Act, workers are protected from disciplinary action for acting in compliance with occupational health and safety laws. Learn more in the "Disciplinary action complaints" bulletin in the [For more information](#) section.

Tips for effective communication

Workers may communicate, learn and participate in different ways. Employers and supervisors remain responsible for ensuring workers understand the information necessary to perform their work safely. Communication methods should be selected based on the needs of the workplace and the workers being supervised.

As an employer or supervisor, you can:

Communicate information clearly

Use plain language, short sentences, clear instructions and examples that are easy to understand. You can achieve this by keeping messages concise, using familiar words, presenting steps logically and writing in the active voice.

Don't say	Say
Ensure all egress routes remain unencumbered.	Keep all exits clear.
Ensure personal protective equipment is worn at all times while in operational areas.	Wear your safety gear in all work areas.

When language barriers exist, translation tools can help clarify information and improve understanding. For example, when a worker needs to explain a concern, a supervisor needs to clarify instruction, or a safety issue requires immediate understanding. However, translation tools should never replace proper training, supervision or clear communication.

Check for understanding

Encouraging questions helps supervisors check worker understanding.

To check for understanding, you can:

- Ask workers to explain the steps back to you in their own words.
- Ask workers to show you how to do the task.
- Ask workers, 'What would you do if you noticed a hazard here?'

Support participation

- Offer different ways to share concerns, such as speaking directly, submitting concerns anonymously or talking through a trusted coworker.
- Build trust by following up on concerns and explaining the actions you took.
- Create a respectful space where workers feel safe to speak up.
- Recognize that workers may have different levels of comfort raising concerns and actively invite input from all workers.
- Encourage workers to report hazards and other occupational health and safety issues.

Reinforce information over time

- Provide visual, hands-on and demonstration-based training to support worker understanding.
- Provide ongoing occupational health and safety education so workers can practice and apply new skills.
- Continuously model the health and safety behaviours expected in the workplace.

Many communication challenges happen when workers are new to a workplace. Health and safety communication should begin during orientation and continue throughout employment. Ongoing conversations, coaching and follow-up discussions build worker understanding over time.

Role of the supervisor

Supervisors are often the first point of contact for workers when they have questions or concerns.

As a supervisor, you build a safer workplace when you:

- Give workers a private space to ask you questions.
- Encourage workers to ask for clarification before starting a task if they are unsure.
- Thank workers when they bring you a question or concern.
- Follow up with workers after they report a concern to you.
- Recognize workers who improve workplace health and safety.

The way supervisors respond to questions can directly affect whether workers continue to speak up. If workers feel embarrassed, dismissed or criticized when asking for clarification they may stop asking questions.

Supporting participation in OHS

The way supervisors communicate can influence whether workers feel comfortable participating in occupational health and safety. Workers also play an important role in sharing information, reporting concerns and asking questions.

Workers support a healthy and safe workplace when they:

- Ask questions when they need clarification.
- Report hazards and health and safety concerns.
- Participate in workplace health and safety activities.
- Share information about hazards, incidents and near misses.

Clear communication supports worker participation in occupational health and safety and helps employers, supervisors and workers work together to maintain a healthy and safe workplace.

Contact us

OHS Contact Centre

Alberta toll-free

- 1-866-415-8690

Edmonton region

- 780-415-8690

Deaf or hard of hearing (TTY)

- 1-800-232-7215 (Alberta toll-free)
- 780-427-9999 (Edmonton region)

Notify OHS of health and safety concerns

alberta.ca/file-complaint-online

Call the OHS Contact Centre if you have concerns that involve immediate danger to a person on a work site.

Report a workplace incident to OHS

alberta.ca/ohs-complaints-incidents

Website

alberta.ca/ohs

Let us know what you think!

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For more information

Disciplinary action complaints (LI061)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li061

Guide to OHS: Employers (LI009)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li009

Guide to OHS: Supervisors (LI010)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li010

Guide to OHS: Workers (LI008)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li008

Occupational health and safety and the internal responsibility system (LI051)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/li051

Workplace violence and harassment webinar (VID009)

ohs-pubstore.labour.alberta.ca/vid009

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alberta.ca/alberta-kings-printer

OHS

alberta.ca/ohs-act-regulation-code

Employment standards

Workers may also need information about pay, hours of work, overtime, vacation, general holidays and filing complaints. The Employment Standards Contact Centre can be accessed at [Alberta.ca/employment-standards](https://alberta.ca/employment-standards) or by calling 1-877-427-3731 (toll free in Alberta).

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