Healthcare employees sustain serious occupational injuries related to the physically demanding work of moving dependent patients, residents, and clients.

What is your organization doing to drive safety for your patients and employees? What is your healthcare organization downloading into the minds of your employees about their daily safety?

The words and language we speak and hear every day affect our behavior and our outlook. Are the day-to-day conversations within and around your organization—in person, on-line, and by telephone—positively driving safety? Or is safety a result of knocking on wood and hoping for the best?

All too often healthcare organizations say they have too many conflicting priorities which impede their ability to address employee safety more thoroughly. But in order to improve less-than-stellar employee injury records, healthcare organizations must change how they are driving and communicating the value of employee safety.

How do you do this?

One way is by ensuring that the language employees speak and hear every day includes messages about their own safety, not just patient safety. And that starts with the organization’s mission, vision,
values, and even the first thing employees hear before they interview at your organization – their job description.

**The Language of Safety: The Interview**

Safety value statements need to begin in the interview process in healthcare. Unfortunately, safety is seldom discussed or requested as a job skill set. Healthcare interviews tend to focus only on clinical and patient/resident needs. To be truly proactive in improving employee safety, we must emphasize that employee safety is a high priority and an important skill set that all employees must have, beginning on their first day at work.

**The Language of Safety: Organizational Mission, Vision, and Values**

Is safety part of your organization’s mission, vision and values? If it isn’t, then employee safety is not a primary objective in your organization. To rectify that, review and revise your organization’s mission and vision statements to include an emphasis on employee safety.

Do your healthcare employees hear positive messages each day about their safety – or are they only hearing about patient safety? Do your employees feel their voice is valued, and their mistakes are opportunities for learning, versus moments of shame and blame? When healthcare workers can easily answer yes to these questions, they will have made the paradigm shift to successfully reduce the frequency and severity of employee injuries.

The first step is to develop and embrace a message that employee safety is as important as patient/resident safety, and to disseminate this message via multiple methods, such as on posters, via emails, on the intranet, at meetings, and in the vision and mission statements. When we begin to do this everyday, we demonstrate that safety is not an afterthought, but is a strategic desired behavior that is championed by leadership and practiced, followed, and mirrored by employees. That is when a truly successful safety culture will be created.

**The Language of Safety Includes Listening**

When, and how, do you listen to employees? This is a basic question, but the answer may contain profound and valuable insights related to employee safety performance. The power is in the words and actions regarding employee safety. DRIVE safety by showing that employee and patient/resident safety are equally important. When you actively acknowledge, recognize, and encourage employees for safe behaviors and actions, you will become the healthcare employer of choice who is proactively achieving great safety program results.
Here’s How to Drive Safety:

1. **Obtain senior leadership support to launch an employee safety program – either refreshed or new.**
   Request that this program charter be an operational objective DRIVEN by senior leadership. Use a return on investment calculator such as this one from Federal OSHA to help justify the equalization of employee and patient/resident safety.
   
   www.osha.gov/SLTC/etools/safetyhealth/mod1_estimating_costs.html
   
   By calculating the direct and indirect costs of accidents in your organization, you can communicate in financial terms how severe your organization’s losses are. An accident avoided = return on investment. A benchmark is only needed on the organization itself. Focus on the internal benchmark more than the industry benchmark because other organizations’ data is frequently unreliable.
   
   Also, remember that healthcare institutions vary greatly, so it’s hard to compare apples to apples on loss data. At the end of the day, it’s important to show progress and deliver positive benefits for your organization, regardless of what other organizations may show.

2. **Healthcare must set the bar for itself and work to achieve a zero tolerance for unsafe actions, attitudes, decisions, conditions, and environments.** To do this, executive leadership must end the blame, shame, and silence culture, which is tolerant of violence. Instead, it must accept mistakes and uncertainty, as they are human traits. Employee safety communication must begin with the CEO to express the absolute value and importance of the objectives. It begins with saying and believing in a zero tolerance for violence or silence. Violence within healthcare and against healthcare employees and the silence culture of not admitting mistakes due to fear of recourse can result in deaths to patients and employees. It’s critical that all incidents are considered opportunities to be valued for learning. The blaming, shaming, and silence games are over. Only when communication and safety are truly valued will the injury statistics change for the better.

3. **Write or review and customize your organization’s safety statement to fit your organization’s culture and system.** Have the CEO, COO, CFO, and CNO all approve this. It’s a new day in healthcare. Begin by establishing an employee- and patient-safety-focused culture. Show the employees that one cannot be had without the other.

4. **Make employee safety a requirement of every employee in the organization by reviewing and revising written job descriptions.** Do your current job descriptions accurately outline the true physical demands of the jobs and work? Change the descriptions to reflect employee safety by lowering
the safe lifting limits to the NIOSH-recommended 35 lbs. maximum for healthcare workers. Do not accept the manual movement of hundreds of pounds as normal. Insist that your system support employees by denying unsafe work environments and unsafe patients and residents.

5. **Don’t just be a passenger. Rather, be the DRIVER of your safety program with an effective organizational safety message.**

   make the message visual and verbal. What we download needs to meet all styles of learning. Here is a visual example of how to effectively communicate employee safety as a priority.

Consider this example:

“At ABC Company, the safety of our employees and our patients is our top priority. We place risk management as the ANCHOR to the legs of the patient and employee triangle.

Safety/risk management stabilize and equalize the playing fields of employee and patient safety. No longer is one party’s safety more important than the other’s. They are equal partners because healthcare cannot operate without both being equally addressed. The risk management ‘car’ is filled with the right technology to help you reduce or even eliminate hazards and losses.”

**Conclusion**

We can help your organization **invest** in the potential of all employees by downloading positive, effective, and genuine safety communications. The employee is the hard drive of the organization with a large memory, and the employer is the software. Consider a safety statement that helps counter your industry loss trends – perhaps “We DRIVE Safety!”

Need help developing a safety program that drives results? Please contact Lori Severson at Lockton, or contact your Lockton Loss Control Consultant.

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To be the worldwide value and service leader in insurance brokerage, employee benefits, and risk management

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**Our Goal**

To be the best place to do business and to work

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