

Compliance Training Versus Effective Training: A First-Person Account

By Tony Boyd, CUSP

Recently, I conducted Electrical Hazard Awareness training at a facility with about 30 lineworkers. We identified hazards associated with typical jobs within the course of their work. When conducting this type of training, I try to influence the audience with personal stories and help them realize that the hazards are there, whether or not we recognize them as hazards. Sometimes lineworkers view hazards as a routine part of their work. They shared stories about incidents that were simple yet caused minor injuries during the course of work. I heard statements like, "We've always done it this way," or "That's the only way to do this job."

Throughout my decades in the industry, I have seen lineworkers participate in training sessions then turn right back around to conducting business as usual, not considering the many hazards that are present. Just talking about these hazards in a "tailboard conference" may comply with the letter of the law, but that, in itself, will not keep workers safe. True hazard mitigation requires action, not just discussion. I believe the challenge for safety and training personnel in the utility business is this: *How do we get the message across so that it is applied consistently from person to person, not just as a duty or responsibility for compliance?*

A couple of days after completion of the aforementioned hazard awareness training, I had the opportunity to go into the field with the safety specialist of that company. A crew was pulling in underground secondary conductors from a building to a pole. One crew member was not wearing a hard hat or safety glasses, nor was he wearing the proper footwear according to company policy and the hazards present. He stated that he removed his hardhat after the conductor was pulled in because the rest of "the job was underground." Other excuses included not liking the way that safety glasses fit, and his boots being wet from working in the rain the day before. After conferring with the safety specialist, I was curious as to how he was going to handle this situation.

The safety specialist spoke to him about the company safety rules and how he needed to follow them. The crew member's response was not very favorable, but he put on his wet boots. I knew this crew member from the classroom setting, so I knew he was an avid golfer. I spoke with him about the personal hazards when not wearing the proper footwear, safety glasses, or hardhat. I emphasized that a small injury to his foot, eyes, or head would drastically impair his golf game. His response to me was, "I didn't think of it that way." He thanked me for pointing that out and said he would be more aware in the future of his safe behaviors associated with the job.

Bringing it Home

Countless training sessions, seminars, webinars, and psychological anecdotes have been offered for improving the safe work behaviors of lineworkers. While I may not have anything new to bring to the table, I believe it is worth reminding ourselves that the challenge for us as safety and training personnel, as well as supervisors, is to become better communicators when it comes to influencing the front-line employee about safety on the job site.

It all begins with setting an example when it comes to safety. If we are speaking about recognizing and mitigating the hazards associated with typical duties, are we exemplifying that in our own daily lives? Are we communicating with management about exemplifying safety in *their* daily lives? So many times, in the past 45 years of my career, I have observed managers as they talk to the lineworkers about safety and hazards, only to turn around and moments later conduct themselves in an unsafe manner or perform an unsafe practice. When managers and supervisors bring safety home on a personal level, the front-line employees usually follow the example and bring it home as well. These are the tools necessary for bringing safety to the forefront of employees' minds.

Compliance Training

With the pressure of “doing more with less” ever more prevalent, compliance training seems to hinder performance when measured only by efficiency or productivity. The mindset of many crew leaders is, “I could get the job done on time and safely if I didn't have to attend this compliance training!” The truth of the matter is, if the compliance training gets ignored and safety is not emphasized, the job will not get done at all. Increased incidents cause down-time and even work stoppages. Incidents and injuries must be investigated, forcing more slowdowns. When it comes to compliance training, we need to create an environment conducive to making it effective, realistic, and applicable not only to our work situations, but to our everyday lives - stressing the “bring it home” part and making it personal.

Effective Training

My definition of effective training is, “Training that can be applied to every aspect of our lives, making us better at what we do!” We must give the “old-timers” who have been doing the job for numerous years the cognitive tools they need to improve themselves and help them see that safe behaviors are applicable to everyday life. We must also learn to communicate with the next generation of lineworkers in their language, in order to instill safe behaviors that can be applied throughout their careers, ensuring a safer workforce for the future. Lives depend on it!

Conclusion

I started this article with an instance that struck home with me about effective communications during a recent training project. I realized that even though the lineworkers in that project seemed engaged and I felt confident that the training was effective, the results at the end of the week were truly less than effective. Safety personnel, trainers, managers, and supervisors, my call to you is this: Let's get it together when conducting compliance training! Make it real-world and applicable to their lives as well as to their work. Whenever we are sharing our knowledge and experience with lineworkers, let's ensure we are giving them specific direction, enabling them to implement safe behaviors for completing every task in a safe and productive manner – in their work practices and in their lives.

About the Author: Tony Boyd, CUSP, is the Project Manager at Safety Management International, an electric utility industry association focusing on safety and training for lineworkers. His career in the utility industry spans 45 years, including 13 years as a Contractor, 20 years on staff with an electric utility where he served 10 years as a lineman then 10 years as a Senior Safety Specialist, and six years as a Senior Consultant with the Institute for Safety in Powerline Construction (ISPC).

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