

The Employee Intervention Gap

Why Employees See Risks but Don't Act —and What Leaders Can Do About It

Employees are often the first to recognize hazards, unsafe conditions, and at-risk behaviors.



Companion Guide to
DEKRA's Webinar:
Creating a Workforce That
Speaks Up for Safety



Introduction

Employees are often the first to recognize hazards, unsafe conditions, and at-risk behaviors. They see the shortcut that has become routine, the exposure that no one has addressed, or the change in conditions that increases risk. Yet recognizing a concern and acting on it are two very different things.

In many organizations, employees hesitate to start a safety conversation, offer feedback, or intervene when they observe a risk. As a result, opportunities to prevent incidents, strengthen accountability, and improve safety performance can be missed.

This disconnect between seeing a risk and taking action is the Employee Intervention Gap.

The issue is rarely whether employees can identify hazards. More often, the challenge is whether they feel comfortable, confident, and supported enough to speak up when they see them.

Understanding why employees remain silent and what leaders can do to encourage greater participation can help organizations build a safer, more engaged workforce and create stronger safety performance over time.



Why Employees Don't Speak Up

Most employees care deeply about their own safety and the safety of their coworkers. Yet many still hesitate to intervene when they observe a concern.

Common reasons include:



Fear of Conflict

Employees may worry that speaking up could create tension with a coworker, supervisor, contractor, or manager.



Lack of Confidence

Some employees are unsure whether they have enough information to address the situation. They may wonder:

- What if I'm wrong?
- What if I misunderstood the situation?
- What if someone reacts negatively?



Organizational Norms

- Employees often take cues from those around them.
- If intervention is uncommon within the organization, employees may assume that speaking up is not expected or valued.



Previous Experiences

- A single negative interaction can discourage future intervention.
- When employees feel dismissed, ignored, or criticized after raising concerns, they become less likely to speak up again.



Someone Else Will Act

- Employees may believe that supervisors, managers, or safety professionals will address the issue.
- Unfortunately, this assumption can allow risks to persist longer than necessary.

The Cost of the Intervention Gap

When employees choose not to act, organizations may experience consequences that extend far beyond a single unsafe condition.

The intervention gap can contribute to:



Increased exposure to workplace hazards



Missed opportunities to prevent incidents



Reduced employee engagement



Weaker accountability



Lower participation in safety initiatives



Repeated occurrences of known risks

Signs Your Organization May Have an Intervention Gap

While every organization is different, several indicators often suggest that employees are reluctant to intervene.

▶ Ask yourself:

- Do employees rarely challenge unsafe behaviors?
- Are most safety concerns raised by supervisors rather than frontline workers?
- Is participation in safety observations or reporting programs low?
- Do employees avoid difficult safety conversations?
- Are recurring hazards appearing despite previous corrective actions?
- Do near-miss reports seem unusually low?

If several of these conditions exist, employees may be seeing risks without taking action.

What Organizations With Strong Participation Do Differently

Organizations that consistently achieve high levels of employee involvement tend to share several characteristics.



They Make Intervention an Expectation

- Employees understand that speaking up is not optional.
- It is simply part of how work gets done safely.



Leaders Model the Behavior

- Supervisors and managers openly discuss hazards, ask questions, and welcome feedback.
- Employees observe these behaviors and follow their example.



Safety Conversations Are Normal

- Intervention is treated as a routine conversation rather than a confrontation.
- Employees become more comfortable discussing risks because they do it regularly.



Positive Actions Are Reinforced

- Employees receive recognition when they identify concerns, raise issues, and help prevent incidents.
- This reinforces the desired behavior throughout the organization.



Employees Feel Respected

- People are more likely to participate when they believe their observations will be taken seriously and acted upon appropriately.

Five Actions Leaders Can Take Today

Closing the intervention gap does not require a major organizational transformation. Often, small changes can significantly improve participation.

1

Clearly Define Expectations

2

Teach Employees How to Intervene

3

Focus on Positive Reinforcement

4

Remove Barriers to Participation

5

Measure Participation, Not Just Outcomes

Closing the Gap

The strongest safety cultures are not built solely through procedures, audits, inspections, or compliance activities.

They are built when employees consistently recognize risk, speak up, and take action. Closing the employee intervention gap helps organizations strengthen accountability, improve engagement, and identify hazards before they become incidents.

By creating an environment where employees feel confident intervening and contributing to safety conversations, organizations can transform safety from a management-driven program into a culture where everyone actively participates in preventing incidents and reducing risk.

“The strongest safety cultures are built when employees consistently recognize risk, speak up, and take action.”



Continue the Conversation

If employees are recognizing risks but not speaking up, your organization may be missing opportunities to prevent incidents, strengthen accountability, and improve safety performance.

Contact DEKRA for a complimentary consultation to identify barriers to employee participation and explore practical ways to strengthen engagement, accountability, and safety performance across your organization.



Watch the Webinar:
Creating a Workforce
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for Safety



Contact DEKRA
Let's build a stronger
safety culture -
together

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