CONSTRUCTION SAFETY RESEARCH ALLIANCE

GUIDANCE FOR HIGH-QUALITY SAFETY OBSERVATIONS

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Importance of High-Quality Safety Observations

Most organizations have programs where a knowledgeable person tours a work site, observes conditions, engages with workers, and makes recommendations to improve safety. This activity goes by many names like observations, audits, and inspections, and these terms carry different meaning and connotations. Furthermore, the quality and scope of this activity can differ significantly across sites and employers.

This guide provides the standards of a high-quality observation, where the intended purpose is to:

1. Tour and visit the jobsite
2. Observe work conditions
3. Engage with workers
4. Ensure the presence of Direct Controls
5. Ensure compliance with required procedures
6. Recognize positive observations
7. Provide coaching to address shortcomings
8. Document observations

High-quality observations do not focus only on compliance, checklists, or paperwork. Instead, they involve walking the site, holding active discussions, and focusing on life-threatening hazards and required safeguards. This philosophy makes safety observations a process of understanding the work and improving conditions. This guide describes the key practice for world class safety observations consistent with this definition and scope.

Terminology

Observer:

A member from site leadership or management who is knowledgeable about both safety and the on-going tasks on the jobsite.

Life-Threatening Hazard:

A life-threatening hazard is one that is so dangerous that the most likely outcome from contact is a serious injury or fatality. These are also referred to as high-energy hazards. Examples include pressurized vessels, moving parts of energized equipment, and suspended loads.

Direct Control:

A targeted intervention that provides a sufficient safeguard against a life-threatening hazard like fall protection, lock-out tag-out, and machine guarding.

Before The Assessment

Strong preparation enables the observer to perform a comprehensive safety evaluation and have meaningful discussions with the workers.

To be prepared to make observations on site, the observer should:

Know the day:

Before visiting the site, speak with key personnel to gain a detailed understanding of the work being performed on site, the conditions of the worksite, and if there are any specific points of stress or disruptions.

Know how to recognize hazards:

Complete training and assessment that verifies your ability to identify all types of hazards that may be present on site.

Know how to prioritize hazards:

Complete training and assessment that verifies your ability to distinguish the hazards that are life-threatening.

Know what controls are needed:

Complete training and assessment that verifies your knowledge of how to control life-threatening hazards.

Know relevant findings from previous observations:

Review the results from previous observations and note recommendations, action items, or other safety requirements.

During The Assessment

An excellent observation requires a keen eye for detail and excellent engagement with workers. The observation also requires the ability to connect with workers to understand the aspects of the job that cannot be visually observed. The time spent with the workers must be efficient to avoid unnecessary disruption.

Develop Genuine Connections

By demonstrating that this activity is not a traditional audit and encouraging workers to describe their work and how they are working safely.

1. Introduce yourself and explain the purpose of your visit

Emphasize that observations are vital for assessing the safe work practices, finding ways to improve safety, and identifying where additional safety resources are needed. This is also an opportunity to clarify that you are not conducting a compliance audit and that you are seeking feedback for continuous improvement.

2. Ask about the tasks and work environment

Take this opportunity to showcase genuine interest by asking open-ended questions of workers to understand their work. Engage in a positive conversation by asking questions such as, “So, what are working on today?” and “What are major steps you need to finish this task?”

Focus on Life-Threatening Hazards and Direct Controls

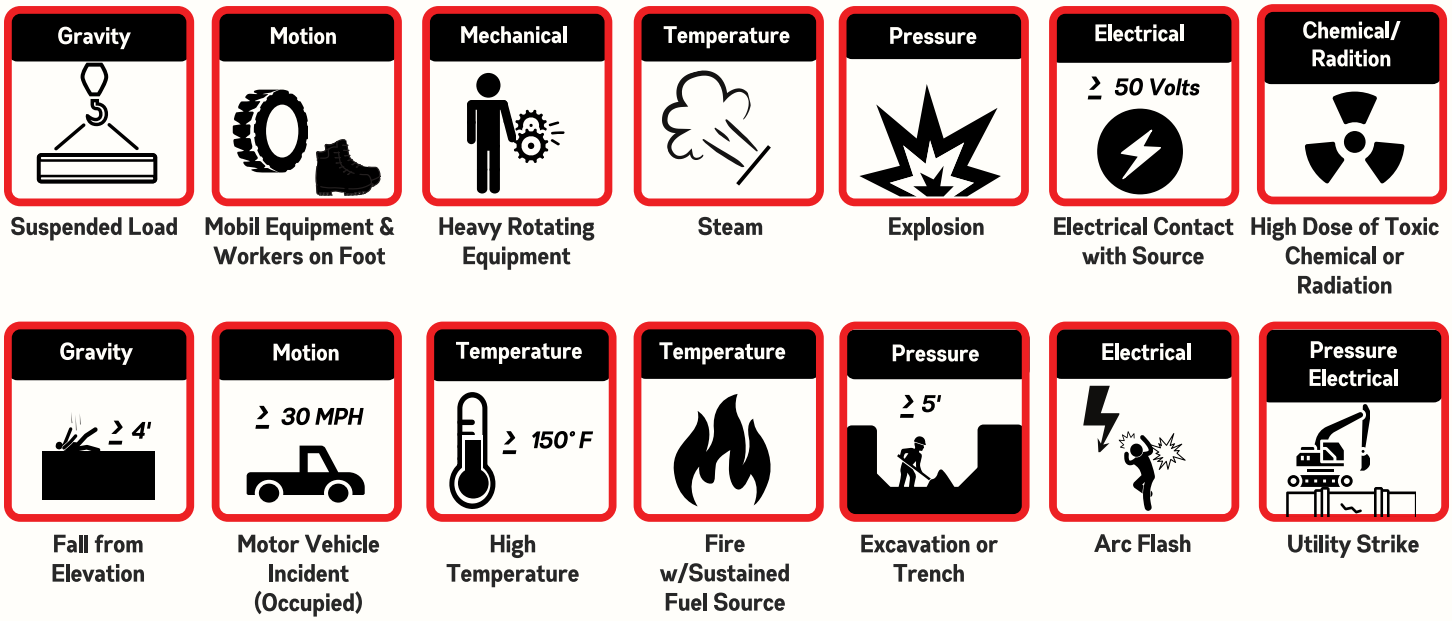
The discussion should clearly focus on identifying and controlling the hazards with potential to cause serious injuries or fatalities.

1. *Identify any hazards that were not discussed in the pre-job safety meeting*

Acknowledge that the work is constantly changing and ask if any unanticipated hazards have emerged in their job and environment. Ask when these hazards were identified and how they were controlled, why they were not anticipated during pre-job safety meeting, and how we might identify them earlier in the future. Use the opportunity to have a conversation. If a hazard emerged or was not identified in the pre-job brief, provide coaching so that they may identify these hazards more easily in the future. Use the energy wheel to help guide the conversation and use it to perform a general scan of hazards with the workers. If a change occurred, ensure that that a new plan was created and approved by field management.

2. *Identify all life-threatening hazards using scientifically valid resources*

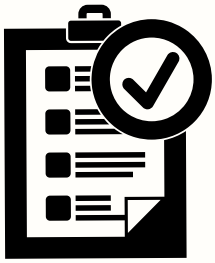
Begin by asking workers point out and describe all the hazards that could cause serious harm if left uncontrolled. Consider asking questions like, “what could cause an incident that one of us couldn’t walk away from?” Only after the workers have described the life-threatening hazards that they see, explain those that they may have overlooked or underappreciated. Life-threatening hazards are also referred to as high-energy hazards because they possess significant amounts of physical energy. Use resources like the high-energy icons to help identify these conditions.



3. *Verify that direct controls are present and adequate for all life-threatening hazards*

For each life-threatening hazard, ask the workers what safeguards are in place. Use the definition of Direct Controls to ensure that the controls are adequate and functional. Review safety paperwork like the pre-job safety brief and any applicable job hazard analyses to check that necessary controls are installed properly and verified. Ensure that any deviations from the plan were documented and approved. When engaging with the workers, ask questions about how the controls operate. For example, ask the workers, “how did you test and verify?” instead of just asking them the yes/no question, “did you test and verify if the control is properly installed?” Provide positive feedback and recognition when all life-threatening hazards have been identified, verified, and controlled. If a direct control is missing, use your Stop Work Authority immediately. After stopping work, establish a corrective action plan and ensure controls are adequate before work can be allowed to resume.

4. *Verify that the documentation of life-threatening hazards and controls is complete*



Check the pre-job safety brief, job hazard analysis, permits, and other relevant documentation to ensure that all required documentation is complete. Examples include confined space permit, hot work permit, or safe work plan for trenching. At minimum, the documentation should include all the major work steps, life-threatening hazards, and safe work practices. Confirm that the documentation has been approved and is easy to access during work period.

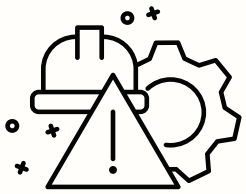
5. *Check the quality of equipment and tools*

Review maintenance logs and inspect tools and equipment to ensure that they are safe and fit for use. Reach out to workers and site leadership to assist with the tools inspection when needed. If tools are in need of repair or replacement, ensure that these needs are prioritized and addressed in a timely manner. For example, when engaging with worker about their equipment, you could ask questions like, “can you give me a quick demonstration of what checks did you have to perform before operating this equipment?”

Demonstrate Care and Share Expectations

Setting clear and realistic expectations that are communicated effectively can foster a positive safety culture. This includes appreciating the positive work being done and providing constructive feedback to address *any weaknesses*.

1. *Ask about challenges and resource availability*

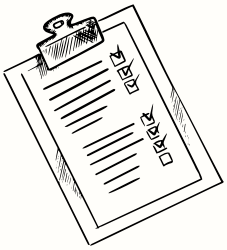


Ask workers to share their safety challenges and how they can be better supported by management (e.g., more personnel, better PPE, different tools, or training). Honest feedback is typically provided by workers when they trust the observer and believe that their feedback will result in a positive change. Consider asking questions like, "what do you need to work safer or more efficiently?"

2. *Communicate expectations related to life-threatening hazards*

Here, observer should highlight what safe work practices beyond the direct controls are required from workers when dealing with life-threatening hazards. Clearly communicating expectation regarding safe behavior demonstrates safety as a priority. If expectations are not met, provide clear expectations and corrective actions if needed.

3. *Discuss previous assessments and recommendations*



The findings from previous observations should be discussed with the workers. Ask how any recommendations or action items were addressed in the meantime. If a recommendation or action item was not addressed, ask why and provide your expectations for corrective actions. Also, ask workers how their own feedback was taken by the previous observer and what changes were made as a result. If feedback was not addressed, commit to investigating why and following up with the workers.

Encourage Engagement and Feedback

A quality engagement requires that you listen, understand, and appreciate the perspective of the workers.

1. *Gather feedback from the crew*

Create an environment where workers feel free to share their knowledge, concerns, grievances, challenges, and solutions. Clearly communicating that your goal is learn from and support the workers will reinforce to them that you are not conducting just a compliance audit. Listen to the feedback being provided and repeat what you hear to demonstrate that you are listening, understand, and appreciate their feedback.

For example, you could ask workers, if there is one thing you would change to make this task safer, what would it be?

2. Provide positive feedback and constructive criticism

In the spirit of continuous improvement, provide ideas and constructive criticism directly to workers and field management. Emphasize any corrections needed, especially those relate to direct controls. To encourage workers, share your positive observations and express how their safe work is valued by the company. When providing feedback, be respectful but appropriately authoritative. Findings from previous observations should be discussed to determine previous recommendations and actions items were addressed or not. Ask why if a recommendation or action item was not addressed and provide guidance.

3. Repeat what you learned

Emphasize that honest feedback from workers is the best way to improve safety performance. Ask open ended questions to foster an honest and open conversation about safety challenges. For example, ask the workers, what rules or procedures are difficult to follow? Rephrase and repeat back what you hear and discuss potential actions you will take to address their concerns. Finally, always acknowledge their time and provide a point of contact where they can provide future feedback.

4. Be attentive and respectful

Show that you are be mentally and physically present by asking follow-up questions, repeating key feedback, and applying active listening skills like nodding your head and maintaining eye-contact. Avoid rushing, checking your phone or tablet, or reading something when they are talking.

After The Assessment

End the observation on a positive note and by thanking the workers for their time, insight, and hard work. Reinforce the safety culture by:

1. Presenting findings of the assessment to site leadership
2. Providing recommendations and action items
3. Clearly communicating expectations
4. Recognizing observed strengths

Conclusion

A team of over 20 industry professionals across industries assembled to create this guidance document. They have concluded that a high-quality observation program should focus on what matters most: life-threatening hazards and direct controls. Compared to a traditional compliance audits or inspections, high-quality safety observations are active and involve touring the site, engaging with workers, observing conditions, providing coaching, and receiving feedback from workers.

Acknowledgement

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***Denotes team leaders**

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