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Learning and teaching about health at work



Everyone can learn to recognize the ways work can harm our health and to identify the changes necessary to make work safer, healthier, and fairer. And because it is necessary to involve others in making these changes, it is important to learn to help others learn.

This book gives you tools to do that and to become a worker health promoter. It will enable you to:

- identify health and safety problems in your factory.
- understand the causes of worker health problems in your factory.
- think about and implement short-term solutions to work problems.
- plan and organize to achieve long-term solutions to work problems.

How factory work can harm your health

There are often many dangers to workers' health in a factory. In this book, the word "danger" means a condition in the workplace (or the community) that can harm you. Not all workers will be injured, made ill, or affected by a danger they experience, but some will. The health problem (usually an injury or illness) may affect workers immediately or may not affect them until many years in the future. For example, a worker may have a skin rash now that is caused by contact with chemicals. Another worker may become sick with cancer many years after he was exposed to chemicals.

Some problems caused by work may not show up until after work has ended, so you may not think of them as a health problem caused by work. For example, some chemicals lessen a person's desire for sex or their ability to enjoy sex. Other dangers at work are also common dangers in our communities. For example, unsafe drinking water or air pollution.

Some health problems are caused by "**work dangers.**" These dangers are often easy to see and may be fairly easy to solve. Some work dangers are:

- repetitive movements
- factory fires
- chemical exposures
- poor ventilation
- spoiled food, unsafe water, and lack of access to clean bathrooms

Some health problems are caused by "**social dangers,**" the unfair and unjust social conditions inside and outside the factory. Some social dangers are:

- low wages
- working shifts that change from week to week and working nights
- threats or harassment from your boss or other workers
- too many working hours
- discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or religion
- working multiple jobs

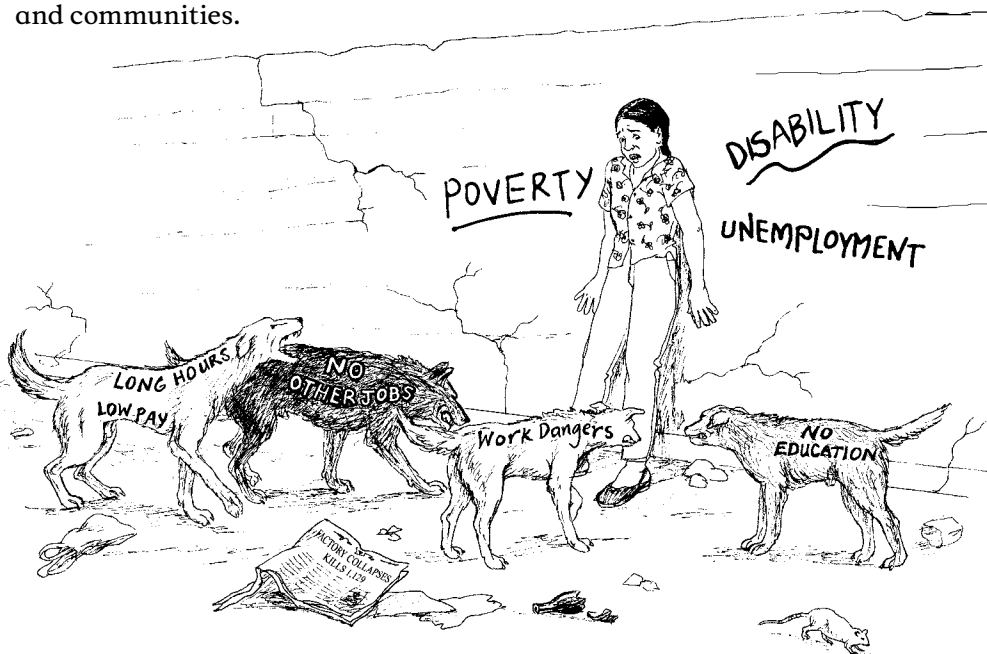
While we feel the effects of work dangers and social dangers as individuals, these worker health problems are not individual problems. The problems harm us as a group, as workers in a factory doing our jobs together. More than almost any other area of health, worker health and safety can only be improved when workers organize to collectively confront and resolve the conditions of work that injure us and make us sick.

Worker health problems have many causes

Workplace problems have many causes. By observing and discussing the problems, you can identify some immediate causes, but you may have to dig deeper to find the underlying causes.

Imagine a polluted river that carries waste into the ocean. You go upstream and find a person dumping plastic bottles and cans into the river. Maybe he is the cause of the pollution. After you show him how to recycle and compost, there is less waste but the river is still polluted. You go further upstream and you find a family piping their wash water and toilet waste into the river. Maybe they are the cause of the pollution. After you help them build a composting toilet and a leach field, there is less waste but the river is still polluted. You go further upstream and you find a factory discharging waste directly into the river. When they change to safe production methods, respect their neighbors and environment, and begin to value their workers' health, the pollution stops.

Workplace problems are often like that river. Work dangers, like the man dumping his trash, are among the causes that are easier to see and to change. However, as you keep following the river upstream you find causes which are more complex. To solve workplace problems we must address the social, political, and economic issues that cause them: companies that favor profit more than people, social problems such as racism, discrimination and violence against women, and structures of power and government in our countries and communities.



Juanita's story

Juanita was a sewing machine operator for 5 years. In the factory, her hands moved lightning-fast as she repeatedly sewed seams about 800 times each day.

As she sewed, her fingers and hands grasped, pinched, twisted, pushed, and pulled clothing parts, bundles, bins, and tools. She worked 10 hours each day, 6 days each week, sometimes more. Although the pace of work was already fast, her supervisors constantly pushed her to do more.

Her wrists and forearms had been sore for several years, but since she could still work, she did not worry. She knew the pain came from her work because on holidays when she took time off to visit her family, her hands began to feel better. Eventually, the pain got so bad she could not sleep. As her hands grew weaker and more painful, it became harder for her to carry water, prepare food, and do other house chores.

She knew other workers had pain like hers. No one knew what to do other than hope it would go away. When she asked to see the doctor, her supervisor said, "No. Get back to work." She finally went to a doctor after work. He told her to rest and take pills for the pain. She could not afford the pills, but she bought them anyway. The pills helped her work for 2 more months. Then the pain slowed her down so much she could not make the quota and she was fired.



Juanita does not know how she will survive. She has no other job skills besides sewing. She only went to school for a few years because in her family, only the boys stayed in school and learned other work skills. She could clean houses, but that pays even less than sewing and is hard work too. She hopes rest will heal her hands so she can return to sewing soon.

Activity

But why?

Asking “But why?” can help you see the causes of Juanita’s problems and choose solutions. Asking “But why?” again and again will give a group the opportunity think of more causes than when they first hear Juanita’s story.

1. Why do Juanita’s hands hurt so much?

Her job was designed to sew pieces of a garment as fast as possible. She had to bend, turn her hands constantly, and repeat tasks hundreds of times each day.

2. But why was the work designed like this?

The boss set up the factory quickly and cheaply. He did not think about protecting workers’ hands and bodies from injury. The boss paid Juanita based on how many shirts she sewed, not how many hours she worked. So Juanita worked as fast as she could for long hours to meet her quota and earn a living.

3. But why was her pay based on how many shirts she made and not how many hours she worked?

The boss wanted her to produce more shirts in less time so he would get more profit. The boss competes with other factories that pay workers the same way.

4. Why did Juanita stay at this job if it caused so much pain?

It was the only job she could get. She has no other training or skills. In her town, most jobs for women with little schooling are in factories.

5. But why is this the best work Juanita can get?

Her family was poor and her parents did not think girls needed to go to school. The factories hire women like Juanita who need the work and won’t complain because they don’t want to lose their jobs.

6. But why does the boss get away with overworking and underpaying workers?

He can treat workers however he wants because the government does not enforce labor laws and the workers do not have the power to stop him. Many workers want Juanita’s job. Garment workers in other factories face the same conditions.

7. But why are there not better jobs for poor people like Juanita?

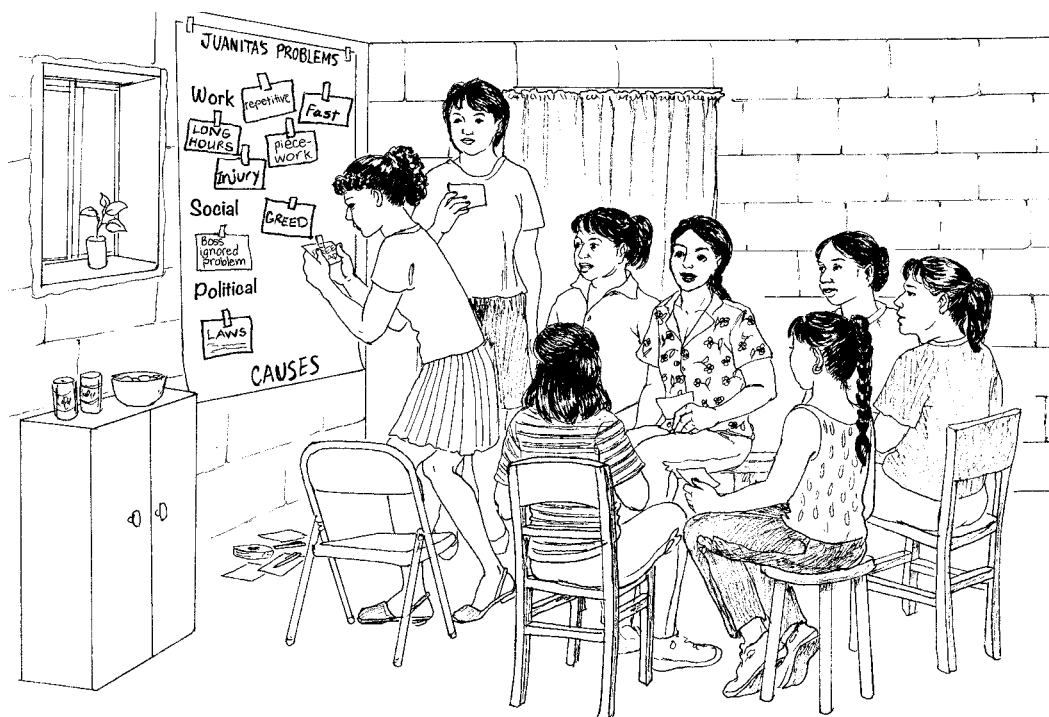
Many poor countries try to attract foreign companies to build factories and create jobs for people like Juanita. The government builds Export Processing Zones or makes special deals to lower the taxes these businesses pay. To afford this, the government cuts spending for education, job training, and other programs that could fund better jobs and prepare Juanita for them.

Activity

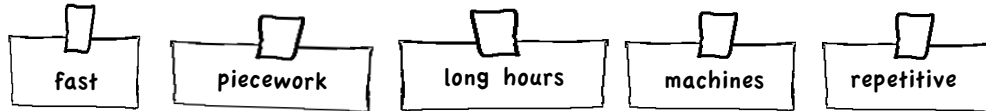
Analyze the causes of worker health problems

Talking about all the causes of a problem helps workers find more ways to solve the problem and prevent it from happening again. Workers can talk about which causes are the most important, which causes they can change, and who might be their allies to help them change other causes. Different workers will ask different questions and come up with different answers. The questions and answers for your situation will grow out of your own conditions.

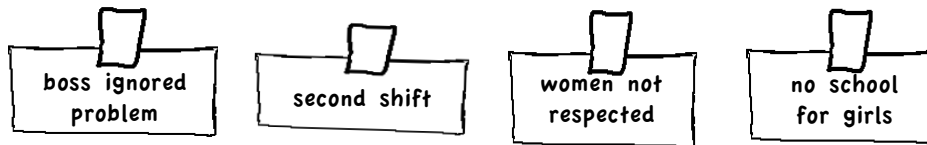
Group the answers to the “But why?” activity to make it easier to see the causes of Juanita’s problem. For example, group causes into “work conditions,” “social causes,” and “political and economic causes.” Create your own groups of causes.



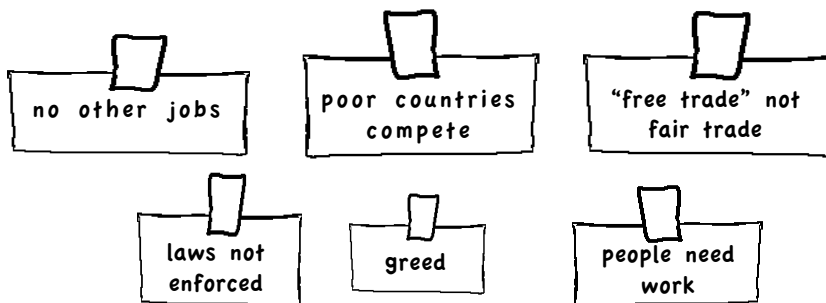
Dangerous work conditions include toxic chemicals, frayed electrical wires, repeating the same movements many times each day, and unsafe drinking water.



Social causes of health problems for workers are attitudes, customs, and behaviors that deny workers' rights and dignity, such as low pay, harassment, and discrimination. Women workers are especially affected by social causes.



Political and economic causes of health problems for workers are actions by those who own and control land, resources, and political power in the city, region, or country. Political and economic causes include: labor laws and policies that allow bosses to pay low wages for long work hours, the practice of firing workers who do not make quota, and the prohibition of unions. Political and economic causes also include governments that do not provide people with safe water, sanitation, education, and other services, and the kinds of policies and pressures that force small farmers to search for work in the city or in factories to survive.



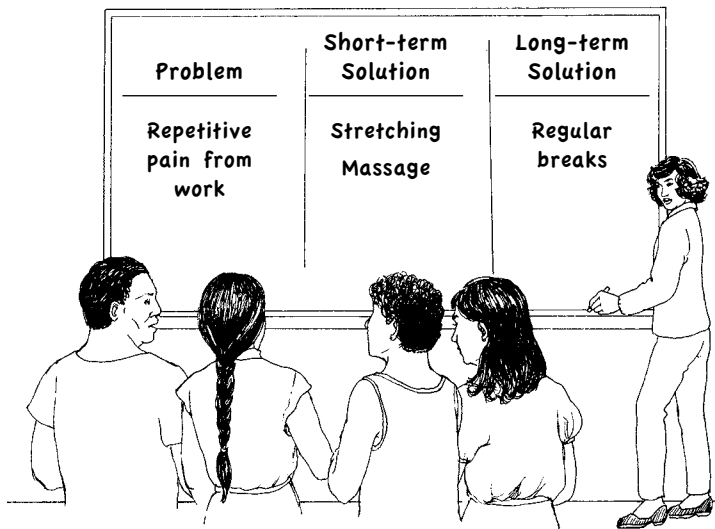
Many ways to begin to solve problems

While the problems might be clear, sometimes the solutions are not. Ask safety and health professionals for advice and reach out to health workers, union safety representatives, or others with experience. Workers often have good and practical ideas about how to make their work safer. Getting support from a range of people can help you find the most effective and realistic solutions.

Short-term solutions: Simple, low-cost changes that do not need a lot of support from your boss can be a good way to start. A good short-term solution protects workers now and can win their support for a long-term solution. Short-term solutions do not remove the boss's responsibility to protect workers in a more comprehensive way. But they do give workers the experience of taking action and winning better working conditions.

Long-term solutions: Many solutions involve finding safer chemicals, getting new equipment such as ventilation systems or safer machines, or enclosing work processes. Safety and health professionals can help design and implement these changes, which may take time to achieve. It is important to involve workers in these long-term solutions. Their knowledge can avoid costly errors in design and installation of equipment, and their pressure can ensure that the improvements happen as quickly as possible.

By actively involving workers in solving a few problems at the factory, you can begin to engage their creativity in other areas of work as well, such as improving the way work is organized and its efficiency, and the quality of what is produced. This engagement and empowerment often carries over to making positive changes in the community as well.



Helping workers learn about health at work

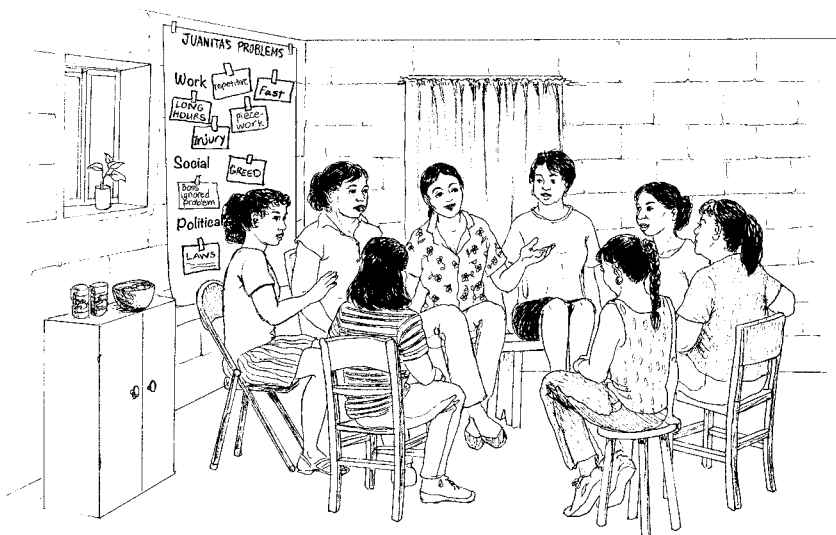
The best people to help other workers learn about and organize around health at work are the people who believe workers can work together to change their world.

A person who wants to help workers learn about health at work and organize to make work safer is called a “worker health promoter.” A worker health promoter does not know everything about how work affects people’s health. She does not have a solution for every problem at work, nor for every issue workers raise. But a worker health promoter can make a big difference.

A worker health promoter can be anyone who:

- workers respect and will talk to.
- has experienced and understands that health problems at work are caused by both physical and social conditions.
- knows that working conditions are designed by people and can be redesigned to protect people’s health.
- believes healthy and empowered workers can build a healthy and sustainable business.
- believes that people with information, training, and the right tools can make better decisions and be safer and healthier.

Worker health promoters are usually volunteers. If there is a factory or union safety committee, they may be part of that. What makes them worker health promoters is their commitment to improve workers’ lives by improving their health and safety at work.





Everybody can learn about health at work.

Your role as a worker health promoter is to:

- Know enough about health at work to guide workers towards the information and advice they need to take action.
- Teach workers how to observe their workplace, identify problems, and find the resources they need to solve them.
- Build relationships with friendly OSH professionals to bring their technical support to answer questions from you and your co-workers.
- Raise workers' self-esteem by encouraging them to become active in their own health at work. Workers are their own best advocates — they are the ones who experience problems directly and will benefit the most from improving health and safety at work.
- Support workers who are ready to organize around the issues that are most relevant to them.

Worker health promoters in Mexico

Promoters who work with the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO) in Mexico talk to workers and encourage them to talk with each other about conditions at work. Often the process begins slowly, with 3 or 4 people discussing their problems and frustrations. Through this process, the workers in the groups gain self-confidence. Usually it starts with small steps, such as role playing a confrontation with a supervisor. Once she's practiced with friends, a worker has the confidence to say to her boss:

"Don't yell at me. I hear you fine when you talk in a normal tone of voice."

Supervisors are often shocked to find even minimal resistance, and workers learn that they have power.



We created this organization so we can share our concerns and learn about our rights. Now we can speak up at work and be heard.

A worker health promoter's principles of health and safety

1. The most important products of any factory are the health and safety of its workers. It is the employer's responsibility to design and organize production to protect workers' and community health and safety first, and meet production requirements and generate profits second.
2. All workers have the right to know about the chemicals, materials, and machinery they work with. It is the employer's responsibility to provide information, including the names, dangers, and needed protections to workers.
3. Workers have the right to refuse to work in dangerous conditions and with dangerous substances.
4. Dangers at work are best corrected by going to the source of the problem and finding safer alternatives. The best solutions exchange dangerous substances for safer ones, dangerous machines for safer ones, enclose or guard machine or work process problems, improve ventilation, and so forth. Only use personal protective equipment as a last resort or backup.
5. Workers have the right to monitor their workplace health and safety conditions, and to get medical care and checkups. It is the employer's responsibility to monitor workplace conditions and make sure free, quality medical care is available to workers.
6. The efforts of workers and their organizations to improve health and safety in the workplace contribute to the quality of work, productivity, and health of the surrounding community. The employer must allow workers to organize freely.
7. Because workers are the most directly affected by health and safety dangers, they are also the most powerful and effective force for changing conditions to achieve a safer and healthier workplace.

The labor laws say we can refuse work if it is dangerous.

We won't go back to work until you fix the problem.



Encourage workers to analyze problems and act on solutions

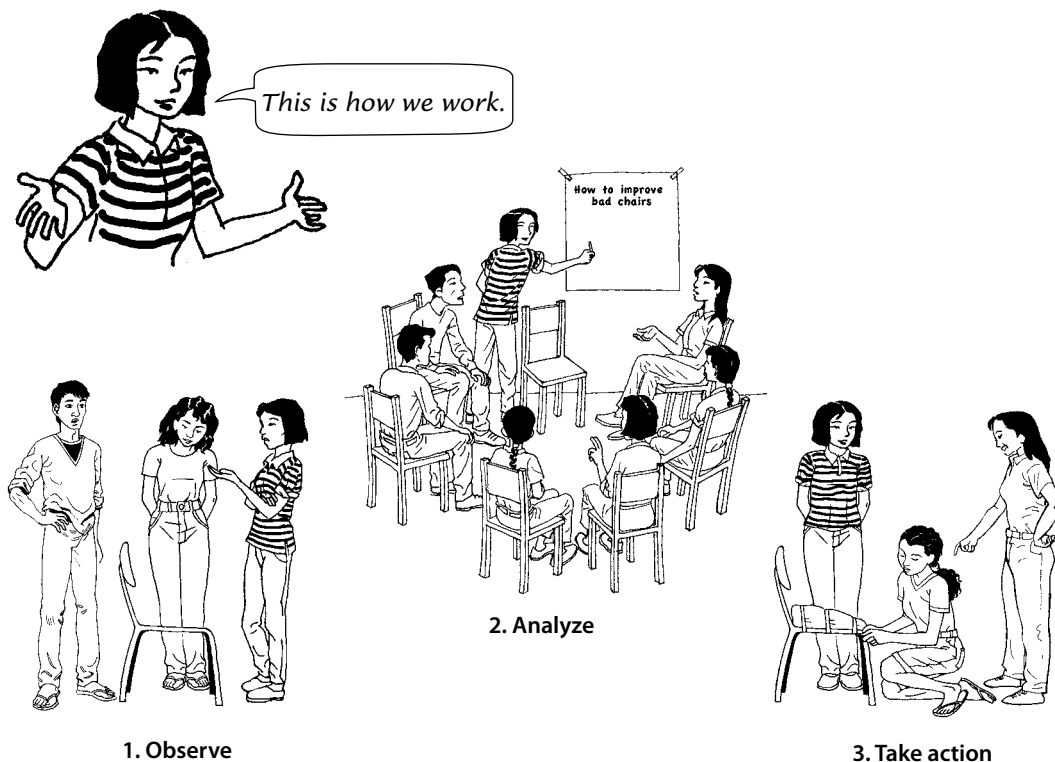
The human mind is the best tool a person has to understand and change the conditions that affect her and her friends, family, and co-workers. Activities you carry out with workers, even informal discussions, should encourage people to think, not just follow. Ask people, “What do you think?” and always look for something useful and positive in every answer. Make sure you listen to everyone, not just the men with the loudest voices. When someone disagrees about the cause or result of a problem, explore the issue rather than dismissing it. A contrary opinion can be an opportunity to talk about the different challenges we face in our jobs and the different ways we can act to make our work lives better.

A good worker health promoter moves:

from sharing facts —————> to learning and teaching skills

from sharing stories —————> to solving problems

from the classroom (theory) ———> to the factory (practice)



1. Observe

2. Analyze

3. Take action

Advice from worker health promoters

Start with what workers know

Start every project, training, and discussion by asking people to share what they already know or experience. To help people think about how work conditions might hurt their health in the future, start with what they might be experiencing now. The activity Draw a map of the body, on page 42, is an example of an activity in which people first share what they know so the promoter can then teach new information.

Even if a person has worked at a factory for many years, probably he has never been asked about how to make the factory better. More than anyone else, workers have inside knowledge about their jobs and often the best ideas about how they can be made safer, more efficient, and more satisfying. Always ask workers to offer their ideas and make time to discuss them.

Work on the big problems

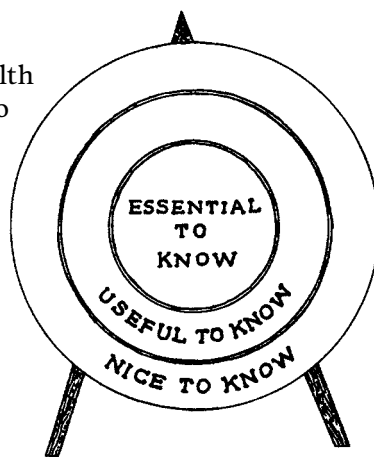
Try to solve the problems that cause the most harm first. For example, you might feel the most important problem is to limit exposure to dangerous chemicals at work, while some workers might feel the most important thing is to be paid more. One solution might be to demand fewer hours of work with toxic chemicals but no decrease in pay. At the same time, you can also press for safer chemicals and better ventilation.

Focusing first on issues that can be more easily changed and improved might give workers the energy and self-esteem to push for more important changes.

Teach what is most needed

There is a lot of information available about health and safety at work. But it takes too much time to cover everything, and it can be more confusing than helpful to receive too much information at once.

Ask yourself, “What information will be most useful for our workplace?” Make the most essential information the center of your classes or trainings. Focus on what will enable workers to take action — the tools, ideas, and information that help people think critically about their situation and prepare them to find their own answers and solutions.

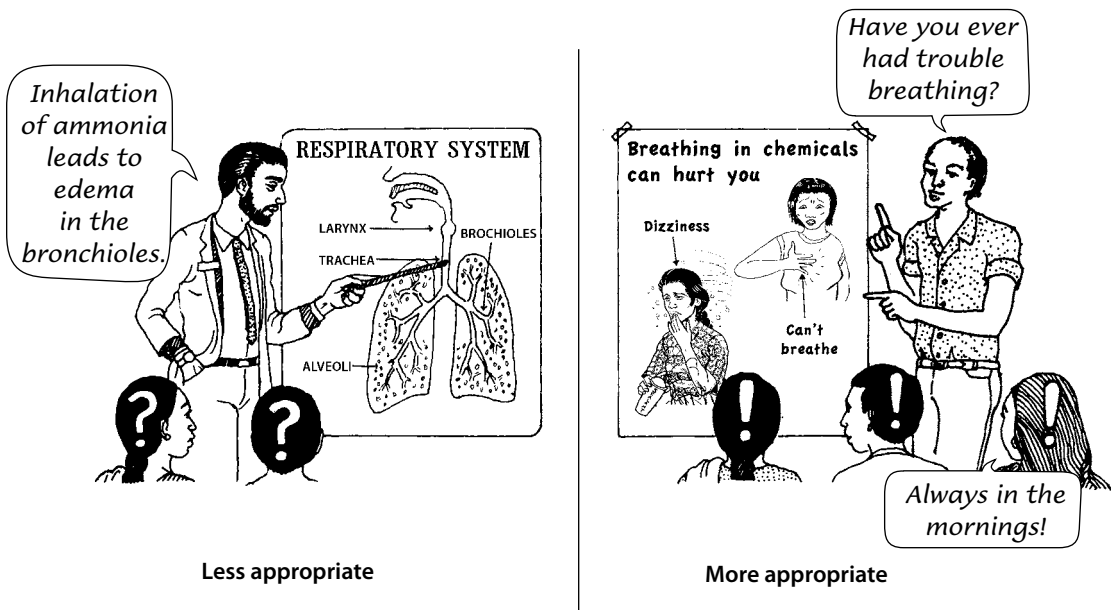


Teach what is most essential.

Use words people understand

Experts often use technical words that have an exact scientific meaning. They learn this technical language when they study, and tend to use it not only to be accurate but also to show they have gone to school and gained power and status.

But most people do not use technical language. As a worker health promoter, you can translate difficult terms into the words that people use every day, even if they are not perfect or “correct.” Always invite people to ask you to stop and explain a word or idea they do not understand, or offer to talk to them separately later. People do not need to know proper technical language to improve their workplace.



Teach people how to learn

Everyone learns best when they get a chance to participate and do things instead of just listening to someone talk. Ask all the members of a group to give ideas about how they would solve a problem. Role plays (see page 325) between the boss and workers are fun ways of getting people involved and having them come up with arguments for and against a solution.

Worker health promoters share information and ideas, while encouraging people to come up with their own ideas. But their most important job is to teach people how to look for information, and how to discuss it with their co-workers to see if it makes sense. When you do this, you help workers develop self-esteem and self-reliance and learn problem-solving skills, and also encourage them to take initiative.

Get help when you need it

When conditions at work are dangerous or the factory management is clearly doing things that are illegal, you and your co-workers might not feel you can safely stop work or correct the problem yourselves. The laws in your country may allow you to call the Labor Ministry, the Fire Department, or another government agency to compel the employer to correct the problem and enforce standards of safety, health, working conditions, or salary and benefits.

The right to workplace inspection



The **ILO Labor Inspection Convention (No. 81)** says that governments are responsible for establishing labor inspections as part of the law.

Inspectors can be either female or male and should have the power to:

- go into a workplace without giving notice, especially if they believe the law is being broken.
- talk to workers.
- look at any documents relating to work.
- post notices in the workplaces about laws.
- take samples of materials or substances for further testing.
- inspect workplaces as often and as thoroughly as is necessary to ensure the effective application of the law.

The **Labor Inspection Convention** also says that inspectors should be part of an inspection system that:

- reports to the government.
- enforces the laws regarding hours, wages, safety, health, child labor, and other issues.
- offers technical information and advice to employers and workers.
- reports abuses to the government, even if they are not covered by existing laws.

The roles of the UN, ILO, and other international organizations that promote workers' rights are explained in Appendix A.

Where to find information and support

There are many ways to collect information about work dangers and solutions. Many OSH professionals like to help workers — that is why they went into that area of work. Do not be afraid to ask for their help. Sometimes a person who answers a few simple questions will become an ally who will support your organizing in other ways.

Your co-workers are your best source of information about conditions at work and practical ideas to improve them. Talk with workers regularly to share ideas and information. Do not speak only with people you already know. Make it a habit to talk with new people every week.



Unions usually have information on the rights and health of workers in your country and industry. They have specific information about dangers in the industries in which their members work. Unions may also have experience solving workplace problems, organizing workers, negotiating contracts, and pressuring employers to make changes. Learning from their experience can give you many ideas for what to try or what to avoid.



Community groups can be very helpful with resources and information about laws, rights, strategies for community education and organizing, and local political conditions. Women's groups, religious groups, and political organizations are often active in campaigns for worker's rights and health. Some of these organizations have national and international connections that may be useful for collecting and sharing information for a campaign.

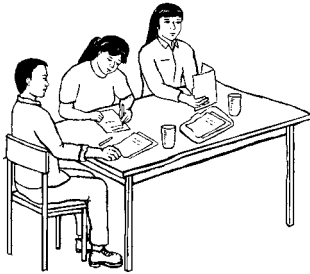


Government agencies can provide information about dangers in your industry, and the laws and regulations protecting workers' rights and health. They can tell you how to file a complaint when working conditions violate the law, and how the law is enforced. Before you go to the government for information or help, consider whether the official or agency has the power and political support to help you.

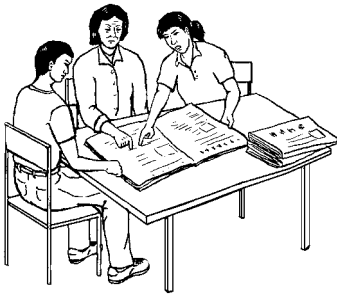




Safety and health professionals may be able to provide technical information about dangers and some solutions for them. They know where to buy equipment, tools, and supplies your employer may need to fix dangerous problems. They may have equipment to measure how dangerous your conditions are. They often know the laws and regulations on workplace safety and health. They can help you access reference books, other professionals, and the Internet to get more information.



Company records may contain useful information on a variety of topics: how wages and work hours are documented and paid, injuries and illnesses workers are experiencing at work, how much money the company earns and spends, what chemicals they use, or if they have measured health dangers. In some countries, the law requires the employer to give this information to workers who ask for it.



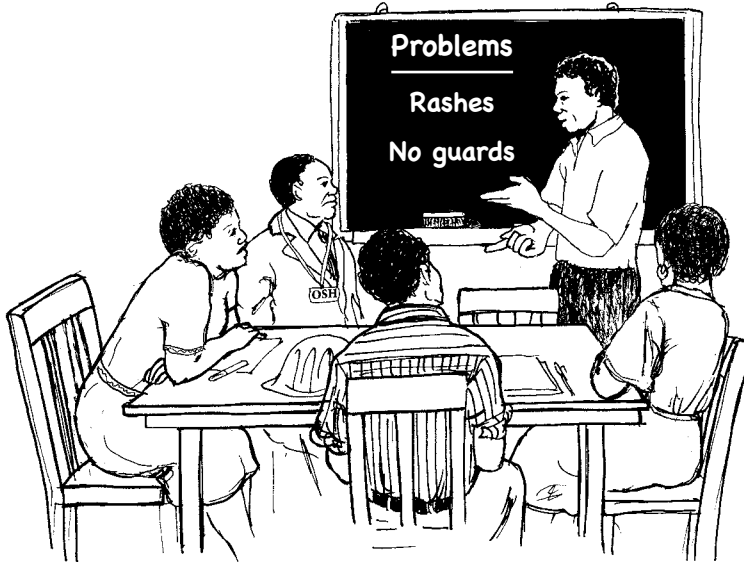
The history of your employer may contain incidents when the employer has mistreated workers or had a disaster such as a fire or chemical spill. You may find out if the factory manager or owner has helped the community or how they are connected to local government officials. Look in old newspapers or government files. Talk to current and former workers at the factory. Ask community groups about them. You will need to judge who to ask, how to ask to learn what you want to know, and how to understand the answer according to the history of the company with the person you ask. Keep in mind that two people may honestly remember the same events very differently.



Books and the Internet can be good sources of information. Look for health, chemical, industrial, and business information. You can usually find information about your country's laws on workers' rights, workplace safety, women's rights, and so on. You can also find detailed information on work dangers and the names of organizations that have more information.

Advice for occupational safety and health professionals

Each one of us has valuable knowledge and experience, but nobody “knows everything.” This is true for experts too. As an OSH professional, you can help workers think critically about what they know and what they are told. When there is controversy and information from employers or experts does not seem right or does not correspond to their experience, encourage workers to trust their doubts, try to learn more, and challenge it if necessary. If they are mistaken, you can help them find and evaluate the information that will change their minds.



Involve workers at every step.

Talk to workers first. Ask workers about their experiences. Focus on the reality of a factory and what happens rather than the ideal conditions, book knowledge, or statistics.

Prioritize what is best for workers and the community even when it might be easier to prioritize what is cheapest or fastest, what is best for profits, or what best serves the ambitions of politicians or employers.

Pay attention to social issues such as wages or harassment. These are health and safety issues too. Health at work depends on more than machines and tools.

Be honest about prejudices. Some safety and health experts work for unions, others distrust them, even when unions are recognized as important partners by the company or government.

Share your knowledge with workers so that they can become better advocates for health and safety.