

Day of Mourning BC Schools Project



How Students Can Safely Refuse Unsafe Work: Lesson and Role Play Activity

Rationale:

Mature adults can find it intimidating to insist on safe conditions in the workplace, let alone students and young people. It is a difficult proposition for young people to ask hard questions, confront authority figures or refuse unsafe work place directives. The intent of the following lesson is to give strategies to students in the hopes of making it easier for them to ensure safe conditions in their work place.

Background

Students should already have been taught or introduced to the following concepts:

- Their workplace rights and responsibilities.
- The role of employer, employee, WorkSafe BC and, when applicable, unions in workplace safety.
- The vulnerability of young workers in the workplace
- Some common safety hazards in the workplaces of youth.

Step 1: Review

It is suggested that you spend a few minutes reviewing the following concepts with the class:

Your Worker Rights

- **You have the right to know:** Every worker must be made aware of workplace dangers and receive workplace safety training and protective equipment.
- **You have the right to participate:** Every employee has the right to participate in a workplace health and safety committee. Every worker has the right to bring safety concerns forward, and have those concerns addressed.
- **You have the right to refuse unsafe work:** every worker has the right to refuse work or instructions they reasonably believe to be unsafe.
- **You have the right to be free from retaliation:** it is against the law for employers to fire or punish you for refusing unsafe work or for submitting a complaint with WorkSafe.

Step 2: Strategies for Refusing Unsafe Work

Pose the following questions to the class and discuss:

"Who here has a part time job? Do you find it difficult sometimes to complain to your boss or supervisor about something that is bothering you at work?"

"Why do you think it's difficult to voice concerns with your supervisor sometimes?"

Use the discussion to introduce the idea that if you are told to do something you believe unsafe, it can sometimes be difficult or intimidating advocating for your right to a safe workplace.

Introduce and teach the following strategies to the class:

It can be difficult or intimidating refusing unsafe work. Supervisors and employers have power over their employees, are usually older and more experienced, which makes confronting them difficult. Here are some ways to make it a bit easier:

- **Ask Questions:** Ask questions or phrase your concern in the form of a question. Be polite and civil, and if possible, even friendly, in your tone. Most employers prefer it when new and young employees ask questions to make sure they are doing things correctly. This is a good way of voicing a safety concern without seeming confrontational. In addition, most employers want to keep their work places safe and are open to having work place hazards pointed out.

Some examples of what to say: *"Is this safe to do?"* or *"What can I do to make sure I won't fall?"* or *"How heavy is that?"* *Oh, do you think I might need someone else to help me lift it?"* or *"Can you show me how to do this safely?"*

- **Voice Concerns Using "I Feel" Statements:** If something in the workplace seems unsafe it is your responsibility to bring forward your concern. Sometimes employers disagree with employees over what is safe and unsafe. If this worries you, when you bring forward your concerns or complaints phrase it with *"I feel..."* For example: *"I feel that it is too dangerous to work on this conveyor belt right now. The emergency kill switch isn't working properly."* Someone can argue about whether something is safe or not, but it's very difficult to argue about a person's feelings. No one can tell you that you don't *feel* unsafe.
- **Get Help:** There is strength in numbers. Voice concerns with other employees who are also worried. Or you can go for help with your concerns to your Health and Safety Representative or your shop steward/union representative. If you have a buddy or two with you, or if the supervisor knows others in the workplace are equally concerned as you, it may make

getting your safety concerns addressed easier. If you are afraid your supervisor or employer won't listen to you, voice your concerns to the Health and Safety Committee, or to your union who can advocate on your behalf. If all else fails, you can always submit a complaint to WorkSafeBC.

- **Standing Your Ground:** If you have tried some or all the above strategies and your supervisor is not listening or insisting you participate in unsafe work, you must stand your ground and refuse unsafe work. **DO NOT** comply and hope to get it fixed later. **You must always refuse unsafe work.**

This can be difficult for a young person to do. You may fear losing their job, or retaliation, or being looked down on by your employer. Just remember, the law is on your side, your employer is not allowed to retaliate for your refusal, and even if they do, no job, part time or otherwise, is worth your safety and personal wellbeing. Politely, civilly, but firmly, stand your ground and refuse the unsafe work. It is your right! An example of a polite refusal is, *"Look, I really would like to help you out with this, but I feel quite strongly this is unsafe. I'm afraid that is too heavy for me to safely maneuver. I'm sorry, but I can't do it."*

Step 3: Group Role Play

You can now divide the class into small groups and assign each group one of the ***Role Play Scenarios*** below. Instruct each group to put together a realistic role play skit where the students take on roles of different characters and act out a scene where employees refuse unsafe work based on the scenario provided. You can either tell each group to use two of the strategies taught or you can assign specific strategies to specific groups.

Give each group time to work on and rehearse skits, then have students perform skits for class. After each skit discuss the strengths of the refusal strategies used with the class.

Suggested Skit Debrief Questions and Discussion Prompts:

- What were the dangers we saw to workers in this skit?
- What pressures were these workers experiencing to do the work regardless of its unsafe nature?
- What strategies did the actors show us in their skits? Why do you think they might be effective if this was real life?
- What other things could they have done or said to refuse unsafe work?

Scenario Notes

Scenario 1 - Gunther's Gas and Go:

- This scenario describes a very real danger that gas station employees deal with today. 'Grant's Law' (amendment to the Occupational Health and Safety Regulations) was enacted in BC after the 2008 death of Grant De Patie, a young gas station worker who was killed while working alone at night. Grant tried to stop a "gas and dash" thief and was dragged by the car driver for seven kilometers.
- 'Grant's Law' made pre-payment for gas a legal requirement and stated that overnight employees at gas stations either had to work with another employee or had to have a barrier between them and the public.
- Recent changes to the law have weakened it, and now the barrier is not required, and employees can be made to work alone overnight.
- Security surveillance cameras and panic buttons **are required by law**, to offer such workers some measure of security.

Scenario 2 - Burgerama:

- Young workers (under age 25) are 1/3 more likely to be injured on the job. One big reason is for this is a lack of training and experience.

- A common occurrence in hospitality jobs, like restaurants, is the use of informal on the job training. This can result in injury.
- Kitchen work is often viewed incorrectly as having few hazards. Serious burns, cuts and slips are some common kitchen associated injuries.
- All workers are entitled to appropriate, thorough safety training and equipment. For example, improper use and maintenance of a deep fryer has in the past resulted in life threatening 3rd degree burns!

Scenario 3 - *South-East Coast Cable:*

- A formal course is required before the safe and legal use of a forklift on a job site is permitted.
- Forklifts can cause serious injury (;)T death. In BC alone in 2016, there were 19 work related deaths caused by industrial vehicles like forklifts.
- Time pressures and impatient managers can make employees, especially young employees, feel pressured into unsafe work practices.

Scenario 4 - *Mega-Build Contracting:*

- Lax safety procedures are often a result of a permissive culture or lack of safety culture on a work site. Production should never take priority over safety.
- Injuries on construction sites are common, as are falls from height. In 2017 in Surrey a construction worker fell to his death on a construction site due to a lack of fall protection.
- Young workers can be intimidated by older, stern, demanding or impatient supervisors on the worksite. Young workers also often want to do a good job, fear undesired attention or employer discipline.
- It's important that young workers know their rights and the importance of speaking out about unsafe conditions at work. No job is more important than one's life or limb.