

Conversation Guide for Managers

As a manager, the close working relationships you have with your team puts you in the best position to identify musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) challenges on the job – and you can play a critical role in building collaboration, encouraging everyone to speak up when there are issues, and identifying effective solutions.

This guide offers communication tips to make the most out of key opportunities to engage your team in MSD prevention, including:

01

**Learning from Your Employees
about MSD Risks on the Job**

02

**MSD Solutions Training
and Education**

03

**Addressing Mistakes
on the Job**

04

Discussing an MSD

At each opportunity, you can facilitate a supportive culture with conversations focused on:

- Your organization's safety policies
- Relevant risk factors for MSDs based on your team's job responsibilities
- Ergonomic strategies to reduce MSD risks
- Signs and symptoms of MSDs
- Importance of early reporting for MSDs, and how to report them
- Organizational and/or community resources to support MSD treatment and rehabilitation

01 Learning from Your Employees about MSD Risks on the Job

A fundamental part of any successful MSD solutions program is taking time to listen and learn from your employees, who serve as the eyes and ears of your organizations. Their input will inform the priorities where you, your team and your leadership need to take action to prevent and address workplace risks.

TIP 1: Become familiar with your team's daily responsibilities.

Engage in conversations with your team members, conduct collaborative site walk throughs and ask employees to show you how they perform their tasks. This is a great way to get to know your team members' holistic needs in addition to assessing opportunities for job improvements.

"I'd love to join you on the floor today to learn more about how your work is going and how we might make things better for you."

TIP 2: Ask about the MSD challenges your team is facing.

Ask your employees about discomfort they may be facing on the job to understand their perspective on what is causing the issue. Use open-ended questions to get the most information possible while avoiding assumptions.

"Do you ever experience pain or discomfort while performing this task? What do you think is causing it?"

TIP 3: Gather your team's input on solutions.

When employees get a chance to collaborate on solutions, they are **more likely** to participate in changes to work procedures and feel empowered to voice future safety concerns. Acting on worker input also improves team morale and employee engagement.

"How can we make this process work better for you?"



02 MSD Solutions Training and Education

Take advantage of formal and informal opportunities to educate your team on your organization's policies and safety messages, signs and symptoms of MSDs and solutions and resources for treatment.

Formal Opportunities	Informal Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Job postings and hiring processes• New employee orientation• Planned education and training events, including team huddles• Annual safety assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Team huddles as ergonomic needs are identified• Collaborative walk throughs• 1:1 check-ins• Sharing new information through team communication channels• Routine observation and inquiry

TIP 1: Keep education engaging and interactive.

Interactive and immersive training can more effectively hold your team's attention and improve learning outcomes. Team training activities, as compared to 1:1 online modules, also give your employees a chance to learn from each other and practice a teamwork approach to identifying MSD risks, how to report an injury and solutions. Consider how you can incorporate live demonstrations, practice sessions and scenario training into ongoing education opportunities with your team on MSD solutions.

- Equity Insight: Consider the unique preferences and abilities of your team members. Dynamic training using mixed audio, visual and hands-on learning methods can better accommodate the varying learning needs of workers.

TIP 2: Check their understanding.

Don't simply assume your employees get the message. A good way to learn new material is to teach it, so ask your team to do the presenting (under your supervision). You can also use quizzes or active participation to verify that your lessons are understood. And the results can help you hone in on areas for additional training or where you should try different training methods in the future.



TIP 3: Gather feedback.

Were key messages easy to understand? Did employees find the training valuable and relevant to their work? Is there additional information employees would like in follow-up conversations?

If you're introducing a new policy, safety technique or ergonomics solution, ask for input on how useful, feasible and relevant it is to keeping employees safe on the job. Interactive trainings can also allow you to trial new protocols in real time and make modifications as needed.

TIP 4: Recognize and reward skills in action.

Appreciation motivates workers at every level, in every industry. Acknowledge employees who actively participate in ergonomics and safety education, apply new safety skills, support team members in safe work practices, identify risks and contribute new ideas to ergonomics and safety solutions. You can use a mix of formal and informal recognition that recognize participation in MSD safety initiatives, team meeting ovations or superlative awards (e.g., safe catch or safe employee of the month award, which could come with a monetary incentive).

03 Addressing Mistakes on the Job

Like all humans, your employees will sometimes make mistakes. It is important you do not jump to judgment or make assumptions about an employee's motivations when you notice deviations from your organization's safety standards. Approach these moments with care, curiosity, and collaboration to open up the conversation. When you take the opportunity to learn from your employees, you find that nearly all employees are working hard to meet the expectations set by the organization and leaders, and you will often learn about challenges and barriers you were unaware of.

TIP 1: Promptly address concerns with care.

Always address safety concerns as soon as possible. Be specific about the behavior you observed and make it clear that your employee's well-being is your top priority.

"I noticed you were bending forward from your back today while you were stocking inventory. I'm concerned because this posture can put you at higher risk for injury."



Tip 2: Ask open-ended questions.

Give employees a chance to explain their approach. Doing so might reveal any challenges the employee is having in doing things according to the standard protocol. You might learn that a safety practice that works for most people is causing discomfort or pain for another.

“Can you tell me about the challenges you are facing while performing this task?”

TIP 3: Reinforce safety standards.

Use the conversation to call back to your organization’s safety and health policies and reinforce learning opportunities.

“You may remember during our last ergonomic training, we discussed different lifting techniques and how lifting with the legs and minimizing the forward bending of the back was the best way to reduce risk of injury.”

TIP 4: Collaborate on solutions.

Use these conversations to demonstrate that you are a partner in your employee’s safety and well-being. Corrective conversations are also a valuable moment to gather input on how a safety protocol or practice could be adapted or changed – either for particular employees or for the entire team.

“Are there things that I or the organization can do to improve this job?”

- Equity Insight: Ergonomics is often not one-size-fits-all. Ergonomic interventions that work for most able-bodied adults may actually worsen injuries for people with differing abilities or for those with certain medical conditions. Additionally, many current ergonomic guidelines and design requirements are based on characteristics of men and do not always fully accommodate women in the workforce.

TIP 5: Avoid judgment and blame.

People on your team will inevitably make mistakes as they learn and apply new skills, and even as they maintain ongoing practices over time. Penalizing or belittling employees for their mistakes risks them staying silent about challenges they face on the job and can stifle learning – both for you and your employee. Lead corrective conversations with a growth and learning mindset that conveys your commitment to your employees’ safety, health and success.

“Adopting a new skill can take some practice. I’m here to help you get more comfortable with it.”

“Your safety on the job is what’s most important to me. Let’s keep working together on this.”

04 Discussing an MSD

TIP 1: Share observations with care and concern.

If you notice an employee is showing signs of an injury, emphasize that you are coming from a place of care, free of judgment. What you don't want is for them to stay silent about their symptoms out of fear that their performance will be judged negatively.

***"You seem to be wincing while moving that tool cart. Is everything okay?
I'm concerned for your wellbeing."***

- Equity Insight: Men – particularly Black and Hispanic/Latino men, and those in rural communities – often face cultural stigma that discourages them from admitting pain. Sharing specific observations about behaviors versus expressing assumptions about pain levels may help open up the conversation.

TIP 2: Get your employee to describe their symptoms and sources of pain.

You will get the most information from open-ended questions that let your employee take the lead on describing their symptoms and sources of pain. The more information you have, the better you can refer the employee to appropriate services and address existing risks to prevent further injury for all employees on your team.

"Can you tell me about any discomfort you might be experiencing on the job?"

"What tasks are causing you difficulty?"

TIP 3: Reinforce the importance of wellbeing.

To keep employees feeling supported to come forward about their injuries, emphasize that your organization puts a priority on wellbeing, both for success on the job and, more importantly, outside of it.

"Taking care of these symptoms can help make sure you can live your fullest life on and off the job. If you are experiencing discomfort, we want to help you address it."



TIP 4: Connect your team to supportive care.

Your employee may not be aware of how to report an injury, workers' compensation rights, healthcare coverage or other options available through their benefits package. Take time to discuss how to submit an injury report and how workers' compensation claims are filed along with the other services offered at your organization. You can also add information about local organizations and providers that provide free or low-cost options for care.

"Are you aware of the options available for medical diagnosis, treatment and recovery from MSDs? Can we go over some of them together?"

- Equity Insight: Low-wage or hourly workers may be particularly concerned about loss of income if they take time off for MSD recovery. Make clear that workers' compensation will often cover lost wages or that your employee may be eligible for disability benefits depending on the severity and duration of their injury.

TIP 5: Collaborate with employees on a return-to-work plan.

A return-to-work program creates clarity about how employees can return to the job safely following an injury or illness. Make your employees aware that you support their safe return-to-work. If your human resources department doesn't already have a policy in place, collaborate with your employee on an individualized plan, making sure to follow the recommendations of the employee's healthcare provider. Review your employee's job description and duties for necessary modifications (e.g., modifications to existing workflow or workstation, flexibility with work hours and rest breaks, temporary work in other departments or light, transitional duties) and work with your employee on a timeline to resume regular responsibilities.

Remember that recovery from an MSD is rarely straightforward or predictable. Maintain flexibility with your employee throughout the process. Make sure to stay in communication with the injured employee throughout their leave and return to work to let them know that you care and offer coping support.

"We support your return-to-work, and would like to bring you back to work safely. Let's discuss opportunities for you to take on tasks that are compatible with your recovery."

- Equity Insight I: Supporting safe return-to-work for an injured employee can help them resume work sooner, reducing wage loss while also reducing risk of long-term disability.
- Equity Insight II: Some workers may view alternative assignments as punitive. Work with your employee to identify transitional duties that are valuable to the organization, and regularly communicate the importance of the work your employee is contributing during their recovery.



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