

How to start a safety conversation (safety chat-up lines)

"Hey gorgeous, do you come here often?" – oops, wrong article!

We have seen plenty of evidence to suggest that regular, positive engagements on safety will improve the safety performance and stop people from getting hurt. We have been through training on the principles and basic skills of engagement and had plenty of opportunity to practise. Yet taking that first step into a conversation can still be daunting for many of us. I addressed some of these issues in another article (*The Difficulty in Speaking Up*). Some people find it really easy and these are probably also the ones who didn't hold back all those years ago at the youth club or school disco either and as a result got the girl/boy while the rest of us were left wishing we had made a move.

I heard of a great quote recently from someone who regularly has safety conversations: *"The opening line of the song is the most important"*. It sets the whole tone, opens the door and gets you off to a good start. We might go further and say that actually it is the intro, before the first line that really makes the difference. In conversation terms this is what you say before you speak. This is determined by your frame of mind, maybe based on your motivation for having the conversation. Are you there because you care about other people's well-being, are you genuinely interested, or are you just getting the tick in the box in order to meet a target? All of this is broadcast loud and clear through your body language – remember that this accounts for most of our communication.

The best way to come across as being genuinely interested - is to be genuinely interested, simple really! Think about how you can compliment someone, give them some recognition or positive reinforcement. *"That looks complicated, what are you doing?" "I have never understood that, would you mind explaining it?" "Is that as difficult as it looks?" "What a great looking job, how long have you been doing it?"* All these are saying: you have more knowledge/skill/understanding than me – please help. This is building up a person's self esteem rather than attacking it with criticism and finding fault, which sadly is far too many people's experience of safety conversations.

On most occasions we just need to overcome the initial barrier. I remember a great example of trying to start a conversation with a refuse vehicle driver on a landfill site:

"Excuse me; can I just have a quick chat about safety?"

"Sorry mate, haven't got time. If I don't get off straight away I will be late for my next pick-up"

"No worries, I just wanted to say what a good job I thought you were doing"

Twenty minutes later, having discussed all manner of safety issues, I had to suggest that the driver ought to get back to his round. The problem in that case, I suspect, was the driver's perception of what was coming: safety = telling off therefore try to avoid.

Overcoming those barriers just takes confidence, which comes from practice. What also comes from regular practice is the recognition that the majority of people are quite happy to talk, provided that you take an appropriate approach and put them at ease – overcoming their own natural barriers. The truth is we don't really need fancy chat-up lines; they are for our benefit not for the benefit of the person we are approaching. It is just about having the true desire to talk to someone – because we are genuinely interested in what they are doing or because we really do care about their safety and well-being. Having said that, if we can develop some simple strategies that seem to work, the perceived chore of having to engage others on safety could actually become quite rewarding.