

Weekly Safety Briefings

Week 29 – Monday, July 13 – Friday, July 17, 2026

We Have Always Done It This Way

Introduction – “We Have Always Done It This Way”

Introduction for Leaders (Use Before Monday’s Toolbox Talk)

Purpose for Supervisors:

This week, we’re building a conversation around one of the most common phrases in any workplace: “We’ve always done it this way.” You’ve probably said it. Your team has probably said it. And to be fair, sometimes it’s perfectly true that some methods have stood the test of time because they genuinely work well. But in a safety context, this phrase can quietly protect practices that no longer make sense, haven’t been examined in years, or were never as safe as everyone assumed. Our goal this week is to help the team distinguish between traditions worth keeping and habits worth questioning.

How Leaders Should Frame This Week’s Toolbox Talks:

- Be careful not to frame this as an attack on experience. The goal is not to dismiss what long-tenured people know; it’s to harness that knowledge in a way that also stays open to improvement.
- Make it safe to ask “why.” If the culture on your team punishes people for questioning how things are done, this week will not land well. Model curiosity openly.
- Come prepared with one honest example of a practice your team has updated or should update. Your willingness to examine your own methods sets the tone.

Monday – What the Phrase Actually Means and What It Hides

Discussion:

Let’s start with something honest. “We’ve always done it this way” is one of the most natural things a person can say. It’s not laziness, and it’s not stubbornness; most of the time, it comes from a genuine place. You learned something, it worked, you kept doing it. That’s reasonable. That’s how knowledge gets passed down. The trouble is that the phrase doesn’t tell you anything about whether the practice is still the right one. It only tells you how long it has been happening. Duration is not the same as safety. A practice can be repeated hundreds of times, over many years, with no apparent problems, and still carry a real risk that hasn’t yet triggered. The absence of an incident is not proof that a method is safe. It might just mean the conditions haven’t been quite right for the hazard to reveal itself. And when they finally are, the fact that it’s “always been done this way” doesn’t protect anyone.

Here is what the phrase often hides:

It hides the original reason. Most practices started for a reason. But over time, the reason gets separated from the practice. People take the step without knowing why, which makes it hard to evaluate whether it still applies and easy to skip when it feels inconvenient.

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It hides changes in context. Equipment changes. Materials change. Crew composition changes. Regulatory standards change. A method that was appropriate for one version of a job may not be appropriate for the current version but if no one asks the question, that gap may never surface.

It hides accumulated drift. As we have talked about in past weeks, practices shift gradually over time. What “we’ve always done” today may be a slow drift away from what was originally intended, with no one marking the moment the change happened.

It hides discomfort with questioning. Sometimes the phrase is used not because the speaker truly believes the method is right, but because challenging it feels risky, like questioning a senior person, or suggesting the team has been doing something wrong. The phrase becomes a way to close a conversation that feels uncomfortable to open.

A real-world example:

At a mid-sized manufacturing facility, a particular cleaning solvent had been used on a specific machine for over a decade. Nobody questioned it; it cleaned the machine effectively, the crew knew how to use it, and it had “always been done this way.” When a new safety manager conducted a routine chemical inventory review, she discovered that the solvent had been quietly reclassified as a higher-hazard substance several years earlier, and that the ventilation in that area was no longer sufficient to meet the updated exposure guidelines. The crew had been working with it for years without the proper controls in place, not because anyone was careless, but because the practice predated the change and nobody had connected the two. One question, “Why do we use this?” opened a conversation that led to a substitution, an updated procedure, and a much safer setup for the whole crew.

Team member engagement:

“Is there a task or step in our work where, if someone asked you why we do it that way, you’d have to say you’re honestly not sure? What is it?”

Tuesday – When Tradition Is Worth Keeping and When It Isn’t

Discussion:

We want to be careful this week not to swing too far in the other direction. Questioning everything for its own sake isn’t the goal, and dismissing experience because something is old isn’t smart. Some practices have been done the same way for a long time because they represent genuinely good solutions that have been proven and refined over years of real-world use and are still well-suited to current conditions. The goal isn’t to challenge every established method. The goal is to be able to tell the difference between a practice that has earned its place and one that has just outlasted the thinking that created it. That distinction usually comes down to one question: can we explain why?

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A practice is probably worth keeping when:

- You can clearly explain why the method exists and what risk it addresses, and that reasoning still applies to current conditions.
- It has been reviewed at some point against current standards, equipment, and materials, not just assumed to be current because it's familiar.
- It has genuinely held up over time as the right approach, not just survived because no one got around to questioning it.

A practice is worth questioning when:

- No one can explain the reasoning behind it anymore, it's just "how we do it."
- The equipment, materials, environment, or team for which it was designed have changed significantly.
- Newer safety information, guidelines, or technology suggest a better approach exists.
- It was adopted informally and never formally reviewed. It became "the way we do it" through repetition, not through deliberate decision.

A real-world example:

A crew at a distribution center had a long-standing practice of staging certain pallets along one wall before loading, a workflow established years ago when the facility had a different layout. The workflow had been passed down through three generations of crew members and was considered just part of how the job worked. When a new layout was introduced, and someone finally asked why the pallets were staged that way, nobody could give a clear reason. Investigating further, a lead discovered the original method had been set up to avoid a forklift path that no longer existed. Adjusting the staging location cut transit time, reduced congestion in the area, and eliminated a tight corner that had produced three near-misses in the past eighteen months. The practice had outlasted its original purpose by years.

Team member engagement:

"Are there practices in our work that you think are genuinely solid things we do the way we do them for good reasons? And are there others you're less sure about?"

Challenge for the day:

Ask Why:

"Pick one task you do routinely today and ask yourself: Can I explain why each step is done the way it is? If you hit a step where the honest answer is 'I'm not sure,' hold onto that. We'll talk about what to do with it."

Wednesday – How Practices Drift Without Anyone Deciding to Change Them

Discussion:

One of the most important things to understand about "we've always done it this way" is that the "it" is often not actually what was originally intended. Practices drift over time, gradually, informally, without anyone consciously deciding to change them. A step gets shortened because someone was in a hurry once and it

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seemed fine. A substitution gets made because the original item wasn't available one day. A sequence gets adjusted because a new person learned it slightly differently and passed that version on.

Each individual drift is usually small. But over months and years, the accumulated drift can take a practice a long way from where it started, and the team doing it has no idea, because each version felt like "the way we've always done it." What was actually being preserved was the most recent version of the drift, not the original method.

How drift typically happens:

Training drift happens when procedures are taught person-to-person rather than from the written source. Each hand-off introduces small variations. Over time, what new employees are taught reflects how the most recent trainer has always done it, which may be two or three generations removed from the original procedure.

Resource drift happens when a substitute is introduced, a different tool, material, or method, due to availability or cost, and over time the substitute becomes the default without anyone deliberately choosing it as the permanent approach.

Cultural drift happens when senior members of a team model a variation and newer members follow their lead, reading the senior person's approach as authoritative. The variation spreads not because it was vetted, but because of who was doing it.

A real world example:

A crew had a written procedure for a chemical transfer task that included a specific sequence for connecting and disconnecting lines to prevent backflow. Over the years, two of the steps in the sequence had been quietly reversed, not through any decision, but because one experienced operator had done it that way and everyone who trained under him picked it up. The reversed sequence worked fine under normal conditions but created a backflow risk during a specific pressure scenario that came up infrequently. When an incident occurred and the investigation reviewed what the crew was actually doing against what the procedure said, the gap was immediately visible. The written procedure hadn't changed. The practice had drifted away from it, step by step, over years, and the team was certain they were doing it the way they had "always done it." They were. They just didn't realize what "always" had gradually become.

Team member engagement:

"Have you ever compared what you actually do on a task to what the written procedure says and found a gap? What did you find, and how did the difference get there?"

Challenge for the day:

Procedure Check:

"Today, pull out the written procedure for one task you do regularly and follow along as you do it. Not to grade yourself, just to see if what you do and what it says still match."

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Thursday – Making It Safe to Say ‘I Think There’s a Better Way’

Discussion:

All the self-awareness in the world about outdated practices doesn’t matter much if people don’t feel safe saying something about them. One of the main reasons “we’ve always done it this way” persists is that challenging it can feel socially risky, especially when the practice is connected to someone senior, or when the team has a strong identity built around doing things a certain way.

Building a team where people can question practices without fear isn’t just a leadership responsibility, it’s a culture that every person on the team contributes to or undermines, one response at a time. When someone asks “why do we do it that way?” and gets a thoughtful answer, that question will be asked again. When someone asks and gets dismissed, that question stops being asked, and so do the ones that really matter.

What it looks like when questioning practices is safe:

- New employees ask clarifying questions about procedures without feeling like they’re being disrespectful or undermining experienced coworkers.
- When someone suggests a different approach, the default response is “tell me more” rather than “that’s not how we do it here.”
- People can say “I’m not sure why we do it this way” without it reflecting poorly on them. Admitting uncertainty about a reason is treated as honesty, not ignorance.
- When a practice gets updated based on someone’s question or suggestion, that person is recognized for it. It reinforces that the question was worth asking.
- Leaders model it by openly asking “why” about their own team’s practices, demonstrating that no method is too established to examine.

A real world example:

A new hire named Simone joined a crew that had been together for several years and had a strong team identity. On her third week, during a pre-task briefing, she asked why a particular tie-off method was used instead of the one she had been trained on at her previous facility. The room got a little quiet. Her supervisor paused, then said, “Honestly, that’s a fair question, let me get back to you on that.” He looked into it and discovered that the method Simone had learned was actually better suited to the anchor configuration they were working with. The team updated its practice and the supervisor acknowledged Simone by name in the next toolbox talk. She had been on the crew for three weeks. She almost didn’t ask. But the way her question was received meant the next person who had a similar question didn’t hesitate at all.

Team member engagement:

“How does this team typically respond when someone, especially someone newer, questions how we do something? Is that the response we want to be known for?”

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Challenge for the day:

Respond Well:

"Today, if someone asks you why something is done a certain way, even if it feels obvious to you, take it seriously. Give a real answer, or be honest that you don't fully know. Either response builds the kind of culture where questions keep coming."

Friday – Week Wrap-Up

Discussion:

This week we took a hard and honest look at a phrase that most of us have said without giving it much thought. "We've always done it this way" is not a bad phrase, it's a starting point. The question is whether it stays a starting point or whether it becomes an ending point, a way of closing down a conversation that might have led somewhere important.

We talked about what the phrase often hides, lost reasoning, changed conditions, accumulated drift, and discomfort with questioning. We talked about how to tell the difference between a practice that has earned its place and one that has simply outlasted the thinking behind it. We talked about how practices drift over time without anyone choosing to change them. And we talked about what it looks and feels like when a team makes it genuinely safe to ask why.

Here is the bottom line: the teams with the strongest safety cultures are not the ones that never change. They're the ones that are honest about why they do what they do, and willing to update it when the honest answer stops holding up. Experience is valuable. The willingness to examine that experience is what keeps it from becoming a risk.

Team member engagement:

Let's close out the week with a real conversation.

- "Did the procedure check from yesterday turn up anything? Did what you actually do match what the written procedure says?"
- "Is there a practice on this team that you think is worth keeping exactly as it is, and can you explain why in a way that would satisfy a skeptic?"
- "Is there a practice that you've wondered about but never questioned out loud? What would it take to bring that question forward?"
- "What is one thing you want to carry forward from this week into how you think about the methods and habits we use every day?"