

## Weekly Safety Briefings

Week 38 – Monday, September 14 – Friday, September 18, 2026

### *Asking Questions When Unsure*

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#### **Introduction – Asking Questions When Unsure: The Habit That Prevents Incidents**

##### **Introduction for Leaders:**

This week we are talking about one of the simplest and most powerful safety habits a person can build: asking a question when they are not sure. It sounds easy. In practice, it is one of the things people are least likely to do, especially newer workers, workers in fast-paced environments, and anyone who has ever felt embarrassed for not knowing something.

Many workplace incidents involve someone who was not entirely sure how to do something, or was not sure whether a condition was safe, and decided to proceed anyway rather than stop and ask. This week is about understanding why that happens, what it costs, and how to build a floor culture where asking a question is always the right call.

##### **How to Frame This Week:**

- Leaders set the tone here more than anywhere else. If asking a question gets a short answer or an eye roll, people stop asking. Model the response you want to see.
- Monday carries the weekly challenge. Check in mid-week and use Friday for the report-back.
- This week applies to everyone, new workers and experienced ones. Make that clear from the start.

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#### **Monday – Why People Do Not Ask**

##### **Discussion:**

Let's start with something most people already know but rarely say out loud: not asking a question when you are unsure is one of the most common things people do at work, and one of the most dangerous. It happens every shift. Someone is not sure about a step in a procedure and figures they probably have it right. Someone sees a condition that does not look right and decides someone else would have flagged it if it was a problem. Someone starts a task without being fully clear on what they are supposed to do because stopping to ask felt like it would slow things down or make them look bad.

None of those decisions are made by people who do not care. They are made by people who are trying to do their jobs well and have learned, from experience or from watching others, that not knowing something carries a social cost. This week is about naming that pattern and changing it.

##### **The most common reasons people do not ask:**

**Not wanting to look incompetent.** This is the biggest one. Asking a question feels like admitting you do not know something you think you should. The fear of being judged as inexperienced or careless stops people from getting information they need.

**Not wanting to slow things down.** In a fast-paced environment, stopping to ask feels like falling behind. The pressure to keep moving overrides the instinct to check.

**Assuming someone else already checked.** If a condition looks questionable but the job is already underway, it is easy to assume that whoever set it up must have verified it. That assumption is often wrong.

**Not being sure the question is worth asking.** If the uncertainty is small, it is easy to talk yourself into just proceeding. But small uncertainties in safety-critical tasks can produce large consequences.

**Experience of being brushed off.** Workers who have asked questions and been dismissed, talked over, or made to feel foolish stop asking. The response to the first question sets the pattern for every one that follows.

##### **Weekly Challenge:**

*This week, every time you find yourself unsure about something at work, whether it is a step in a task, a condition in your area, or whether something is safe to proceed with, ask the question before you move forward. No exceptions. On Friday we will hear what came up and what happened when people asked.*

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#### **Tuesday – What Happens When Nobody Asks**

##### **Discussion:**

When asking questions is not a normal part of how a team operates, the gap between what workers know and what they need to know stays open. Work proceeds on assumptions. Procedures get interpreted rather than clarified. Conditions that should get flagged get absorbed into the routine. And eventually one of those gaps lines up with the wrong moment.

The cost of not asking is almost never visible right away. The task gets done, nothing bad happens, and the decision not to ask gets reinforced as having been the right call. This is exactly the same pattern we talked about in the complacency week: the absence of a consequence does not mean the decision was safe. It means the conditions did not combine badly this time. Over enough repetitions, they will.

##### **Where the cost of not asking shows up:**

**New workers doing tasks incorrectly from the start.** If a new person does not feel safe asking how something is done and learns by watching, they may pick up the informal version of the task, the one with the shortcut built in, and never know the difference.

**Experienced workers operating on outdated information.** Procedures change. Equipment gets updated. Chemicals get substituted. A worker who assumes the task is the same as it was six months ago and does not ask whether anything has changed can be caught off guard by a difference they did not know to look for.

**Hazardous conditions going unaddressed.** If a worker sees something that does not look right but is not sure enough to say something and decides not to ask whether it is a problem, the condition stays in place. The next person may be less cautious, or the conditions may be slightly worse.

##### **A real-world example:**

A newer operator was asked to run a machine she had observed but never operated on her own. She had a question about the startup sequence but did not want to hold up the line or look unprepared, so she proceeded with what she thought she remembered from watching. She missed a step in the energy isolation verification. The machine cycled unexpectedly during a clearing operation, and she narrowly avoided contact with a moving component. When her supervisor asked her afterward whether she had been sure about the startup sequence, she said no, she had not been sure, but she had not wanted to ask. Her supervisor said: that question would have taken thirty seconds. What almost happened would have taken the rest of your career.

##### **Team member engagement:**

*“Has anyone here ever proceeded with a task while not being fully sure how to do it safely? What made you decide not to ask?”*

*“Think about a time someone on this team asked a question that prevented a problem. What happened?”*

*“Are there tasks in our area where you think people are regularly making assumptions rather than asking? What are they?”*

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---

#### Wednesday – How to Ask and How to Respond

##### **Discussion:**

Building the habit of asking questions takes work on both sides of the conversation. The person asking needs to feel comfortable enough to do it. The person receiving the question needs to respond in a way that keeps the door open. Both sides matter equally. A team where people ask good questions but get poor responses will stop asking just as quickly as one where nobody asks at all.

##### **For the person asking:**

**Be specific about what you are unsure about.** A vague question is harder to answer and easier to dismiss. “I want to make sure I have the startup sequence right; can you walk me through step three?” gets a more useful response than “am I doing this right?”

**Ask before you start, not halfway through.** The best time to ask is before the task begins. Mid-task questions are harder to answer and put the job in an uncertain state. If you realize mid-task that you are unsure, stop and ask anyway. It is better to pause than to guess.

**Frame it around safety, not ability.** “I want to make sure I do this safely” is a different statement than “I do not know how to do this.” One signals responsibility. Both are worth saying.

**If the answer is not clear, ask again.** A response that does not fully resolve the uncertainty is not a complete answer. It is okay to say, “I want to make sure I understand, can you show me?”

##### **For the person answering:**

**Stop and give a real answer.** A question about safety deserves full attention. An answer given on the move or without making eye contact communicates that the question was an inconvenience.

**Thank them for asking.** Especially when the question comes from a newer worker or is about something the person might have felt embarrassed to ask. That response makes the next question easier.

**Never make someone feel foolish for asking.** A worker who is made to feel stupid for a question will not ask the next one. And the next one might be the one that matters most.

##### **A real-world example:**

During a maintenance task on a chemical line, a technician noticed that the valve configuration looked slightly different from the diagram on the work order. He was not sure whether the discrepancy was a labeling issue or whether the work order was outdated. He stopped and asked the lead before proceeding. The lead checked and discovered the process drawing had not been updated after a modification made two months earlier. The task was put on hold until the correct configuration was confirmed. The technician said afterward that he had almost just proceeded because he did not want to seem like he did not know the system. The lead told the crew at the next toolbox talk: that question is exactly what we want. That is what good looks like.

##### **Team member engagement:**

*“What makes it easier for you personally to ask a question when you are not sure? What makes it harder?”*

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#### **Thursday – When Experience Makes It Harder to Ask**

##### **Discussion:**

We have talked a lot this week about newer workers and the pressure they feel not to ask questions. But experienced workers face a different version of the same problem. The longer someone has been doing a job, the harder it gets to ask a question, because there is an expectation, often self-imposed, that they should already know. Asking can feel like admitting a gap that should not exist after this many years.

This matters because experienced workers encounter situations where asking is genuinely necessary: something has changed and they did not get the update, they are working outside their usual area or on unfamiliar equipment, a new product or material has been introduced, or they have a question that has built up over time and they have just never found the right moment to raise it. In all those situations, the experience does not make the question unnecessary. It just makes it feel more embarrassing to ask.

##### **The specific situations where experienced workers most need to ask:**

- When returning from time off and conditions may have changed during their absence.
- When working on equipment or in an area that is outside their normal assignment.
- When a procedure, material, or piece of equipment has been updated or replaced.
- When something about a familiar task looks or feels different than it usually does.
- When they have been doing something a certain way for years and are genuinely not sure whether it is still the right way.

##### **The hardest question an experienced worker can ask:**

One of the most valuable things a senior person on a team can do is ask a question that others are also wondering about but will not raise because they are waiting for someone with more standing to go first. When an experienced worker asks, it gives everyone else permission to ask too. It signals that not knowing something is not a reflection of competence. It is a normal part of doing the job safely.

##### **A real-world example:**

A twelve-year veteran on an assembly line returned from a two-week vacation to find that a new adhesive had been introduced while he was out. The material safety data sheet was posted but he had not read it yet. He noticed the new container looked different and the application process seemed slightly changed from what he was used to. He had two choices: assume it was close enough to the old product and proceed, or ask. He stopped the line lead and said: I was out when this changed, can you walk me through what is different and what I need to know? The lead spent four minutes going through the key changes, including a ventilation requirement that had not been necessary with the previous product. The veteran said afterward that asking had felt strange after so many years. It had felt like admitting he did not know his own job. His lead told him it was the best thing he had done all week.

##### **Team member engagement:**

*“For those of you with more experience here: is there anything you have been doing for a long time that you have quietly wondered about but never asked? This is the week to say it.”*

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#### **Friday – Week Wrap-Up**

##### **Discussion:**

This week we talked about one of the simplest safety habits and one of the hardest to build in practice. We covered why people do not ask questions when they are unsure, and it almost always comes down to the same things: not wanting to look bad, not wanting to slow things down, or having learned at some point that questions were not welcome. We talked about what it costs when nobody asks, the assumptions that build up, the conditions that go unchecked, the new workers who learn the wrong version of a task because they were too uncomfortable to ask for the right one. We walked through how to ask well and how to receive a question in a way that keeps people asking. And we talked about the specific pressure experienced workers feel that makes asking harder the longer they have been on the job.

Here is what this comes down to. Every question that does not get asked is a gap. Most of the time that gap closes on its own and nothing happens. But sometimes it does not. The question that felt embarrassing to ask in the morning is the question that would have prevented the incident in the afternoon. Building a team where asking is normal, expected, and welcomed is one of the most direct things this group can do to make this a safer place to work.

##### **Weekly Challenge Report-Back:**

At the start of the week, each person was asked to ask a question every time they were unsure about something before moving forward. Let's hear how that went.

*"Did you ask a question this week that you might normally have skipped? What was it and what happened?"*

*"Did asking lead to anything useful, a correction, a piece of information you did not have, a problem that got avoided?"*

*"Was there a moment where you wanted to ask but still held back? What got in the way?"*

##### **Closing questions:**

*"What would need to change about this floor for asking questions when unsure to feel completely normal and safe for everyone, regardless of how long they have been here?"*

*"What is one thing you are going to do differently next week, either as someone who asks questions or as someone who receives them?"*