

SILENT DANGER

The Five Crucial Conversations
that Drive FLT Safety



**Grahame
Robb** Associates Ltd

Learning & Development

Authorised UK Licensee for VitalSmarts

**Fork Lift Truck
Association**

Silent Danger: The Five Crucial Conversations that Drive FLT Safety

Despite a sustained improvement in their accident record in recent years, fork lift trucks remain by far the UK's most dangerous type of workplace transport.

Provisional figures for 2010/11 show fork lift truck-related injuries - requiring at least three days off work - were reported at a rate of more than four per day. Over a quarter of these were major injuries, resulting in a hospital stay... or worse. Last year, no fewer than eight people were killed by fork lift trucks: approximately one in twenty of all the UK's deaths at work.

Clearly, although accidents have fallen by around 50% in recent years, still greater action is required in British workplaces. This report highlights some of the problem areas associated with fork lift truck operations and provides a welcome insight into action that can be taken at any level to reduce the number and severity of related accidents.

The vast majority of the gains in FLT safety can be attributed to improvements in equipment, policies, systems, and training. Organisations have worked hard over the last couple of decades to reduce the number of accidents, injuries and fatalities caused by powered vehicles, and have achieved some excellent results. However, these formal tools often fail to address challenges that are less formal, are cultural in nature, and exist unacknowledged like icebergs below the waterline. These overlooked obstacles include entrenched habits, social norms, and informal practices.

This study, which builds on the global study conducted across many Industries by VitalSmarts in 2009 (Silent Danger: The Five Crucial Conversations that Drive Workplace Safety), probes below the surface by looking for unsafe conditions that are broadly recognised yet allowed to continue because of cultural norms and social taboos. The ugly secret behind most FLT injuries and accidents is that someone is aware of the threat well in advance, but is either unwilling or unable to speak up. Our study shows the greatest danger today in FLT operations is not from ignorance or inattention to risks - but from silence. The next leap forward in FLT safety will come not just from additional changes to processes, technology, or policies, but from changes to behaviour. Unless and until the culture of silence is broken, we'll continue to suffer completely avoidable losses in both individual health and organisational performance.

The Study

Through research with FLTA members, this study uncovered five FLT threats that are especially likely to persist as "undiscussables" in safety-conscious organisations. To identify and quantify these threats, we studied nearly 250 FLT operators, frontline workers, managers, and safety directors across a dozen companies during 2011. In the first phase of the research, we conducted on-site interviews and focus groups with people across all levels from four different companies to find and analyse patterns of poor communication that threatened FLT safety. We then verified these patterns through a survey administered to all the members of the FLTA Safe User Group, to test whether and how frequently breakdowns in communication were confronted, and to test the impacts these breakdowns had on FLT safety.

What we found is that nearly 75 percent of respondents say their workgroup is currently at risk from one or more of five undiscussables or "accidents waiting to happen."

The astonishing and troubling finding is that when employees see one of these five threats, only one in three speak up, and 25% of people say they would never speak up. This failure to speak up and correct unsafe conditions around FLT operations allows these risks to continue despite the inevitability of injury or accident.

Based on the results of the research, we argue that more driver training, safety audits, and other tools that address the plainly obvious threats to FLT safety, while important, will never be enough to create a truly safe environment. The employees in this study already see and recognise these visible threats at the tip of the iceberg but choose to remain silent because of barriers that are hidden below the surface. Our research indicates that the "below-the-waterline" threats are the norms, habits, and assumptions embedded in the organisation's culture. These cultural threats inevitably trump the formal policies. When employees see accidents waiting to happen, they feel culturally constrained from saying or doing anything to prevent them from occurring a large proportion of the time.

So how can you maintain high reliability in a social system when any individual's action can put FLT safety at risk?

The Missing Ingredient

Our research shows the missing ingredient in building a culture of safety is candor. When accountability is carefully and intentionally built into the culture, every employee is responsible for holding his or her peers accountable for FLT Safety. In these cultures, the unsafe actions of certain individuals almost never persist. Ensuring a critical mass of people are willing and able to speak up when safety lines are crossed - irrespective of who crosses them - is crucial to a safety culture. There's the irony. While FLT safety demands that people look out for each other, remind each other, and hold each other accountable for the safe working practices, the reason safety risks persist is because in most organisations, people are unwilling and unable to step up to these most crucial of conversations.

In fact, accountability is the implicit assumption that underlies every FLT and workplace safety programme. Yet our findings show this assumption is more fiction than fact. Consequently, accountability is the critical weakness of the above-the-waterline approach to safety. If people don't hold each other accountable for acting on threats and risks they observe, then more training to help them recognise the risks will be of limited value. Silence, not blindness, is the problem.

This discovery also points to an exceptionally high-leverage strategy for improving FLT safety. This study looks at five specific threats that are most likely to turn into 'undiscussables'. If organisations focus on these five threats and transform them from 'undiscussables' into approachable accountability discussions, they can expect dramatic improvements in FLT and workplace safety.

And while FLT and wider workplace safety improvement is reason enough to build a cultural capacity for dealing with these crucial conversations, the potential benefits go far beyond ensuring human health. Our previous studies show that investing in people's capacity to step up to such conversations can likewise lead to improved accountability for quality, productivity, cost control, HR policies, and any other area of performance. When people learn to sustain high levels of accountability in any area, they can perform better in every area.

The Five Crucial Conversations That Drive FLT Safety

To uncover the five crucial conversations of safety, the original Silent Danger research conducted by VitalSmarts, started by looking for the tell-tale signs of an "accident waiting to happen." We found that these signs combine two elements of any risk assessment: they are common and they are costly. But we also found a third element: these are risks that have become undiscussable.

Below are the conversations that fit these three quantitative conditions. We illustrate each conversation with real-life examples drawn from our survey with FLTA members and organisations.

- 1** Get It Done. Unsafe practices that are justified by tight deadlines.
- 2** Undiscussable Incompetence. Unsafe practices that stem from skill deficits that can't be discussed.
- 3** Just this Once. Unsafe practices that are justified as exceptions to the rule.
- 4** This Is Overboard. Unsafe practices that bypass precautions considered excessive.
- 5** Are You a Team Player? Unsafe practices that are justified for the good of the team, company, or customer.

Get It Done. According to the results, 75 percent of respondents see their FLT colleagues take unsafe shortcuts. Yet only 42 percent say they speak up and share their concerns with the person who is putting safety at risk. What is most astounding is that these common and risky shortcuts are undiscussable for 21 percent of the workforce.

“If there are late deliveries or more urgent shipments, we need to catch up time by unloading / loading more quickly than we normally would, driving too fast or lowering and raising on the move. We know we shouldn’t, and that it creates risks, and it’s not what we were taught in our FLT training...but it’s just what happens...”

Undiscussable Incompetence. 40 percent of respondents see their FLT colleagues create unsafe conditions due to incompetence or lacking the basic skills. 28 percent say they never speak up and share their concerns with the person who is putting safety at risk. Of the remaining 72 percent, only some claim to speak up all of the time and many say that safety risks sustained by incompetence are undiscussable.

“An operator recently had hydraulic oil blasted into his eyes & face requiring a trip to the hospital. He was the regular driver of the machine yet failed to carry out pre-start checks to the appropriate standard, and didn’t notice the issue. Upon inspection by the insurance company, it was discovered that the plastic sheathing around the hydraulic hose had peeled away exposing bare metal, this had worn through and ultimately failed. The FLT cab windscreen was also damaged and consequently did not prevent the high pressure oil escaping from hitting him directly in the face which, unfortunately is a tough way to learn a lesson that people do not know how to complete the pre-start checks properly.”

Just this Once. The results confirm that 67 percent of respondents see their FLT colleagues take unsafe shortcuts. Despite the prevalence of this potentially fatal oversight, one in three never speak up and share their real concerns with the person who is putting safety at risk. Of the remaining two thirds, only some claim to speak up all of the time.

*“We had this delivery late one evening that needed a crane to lift it off. But someone hadn’t ordered the crane, and we couldn’t turn the lorry away. So we just got 3 FLTs and lifted it off the lorry together. It was ***** dodgy, but we got away with it...”*

This Is Overboard. The majority of respondents, 64 percent, see their FLT colleagues violate safety precautions they’ve discounted, or considered to be over the top. 24 percent never speak up about these issues, and of the remaining three quarters, only some speak up candidly to share their real concerns.

“During audits in the warehouse, the cages are fixed to the FLT forks for the person to do the check. You are supposed to lower the cage before the FLT moves down the aisle, but it does not happen. The view is that if you move slowly, it is safe...”

Are You a Team Player? The data reveals 48 percent of respondents see their FLT colleagues violate safety precautions “for the good of the team, company, or customer.” Only half of the respondents say they speak up and share their concerns with the person who is putting the team at risk, and a quarter say they would never speak up.

“Moving off before lowering a load is a very common complaint within our warehouse. Driver will nearly always move away before the load is fully lowered. As the manager, I do have a concern on this matter; however I am fully aware that if every load was fully lowered as instructed in the training, our productivity would be seriously affected.”

Taken together, these five undiscussables account for a vast number of FLT and powered vehicles accidents waiting to happen. And it's not that the people who remain silent don't care. What we heard in our interviews wasn't bystander apathy; it was more like bystander agony. People describe themselves as "holding their breath," "feeling tortured as they watch," and "not able to watch" as their colleagues put themselves and others in danger. But regardless of their fear, people don't speak up when faced with one of these five undiscussable situations. They don't think it's their role; they don't know how; and they are afraid of retaliation, or how they will be perceived by their colleagues. The cultural norms, habits, and assumptions that exist "below-the-waterline" prevent employees from voicing concerns.

Learn from the Best, Teach the Rest

Notice that none of the examples above are completely undiscussable. There is always a minority who say they are able to speak up effectively and address the unsafe situation. According to the original Silent Danger research conducted by VitalSmarts, these few individuals have an amazing impact: 63 percent of the time they create a safer situation. This correlation makes sense. People who feel able to confront and resolve potential problems they see, take action and make the environment safer for everyone. Consider one example of a peer addressing the unsafe behaviour of FLT Operator worker in a way that is both candid and respectful.

"I'd like to talk to you about an important concern. You may not realise it, but I think the way you operate the FLT at certain times puts yourself and the rest of the team at risk. I really value our relationship and respect your experience and so I'd like to explore this issue with you. Can I explain what I'm seeing and get your point of view?"

What is most important about an interaction like this is that it gets to the heart of the accident waiting to happen - the unsafe practice that puts others' safety at risk. An individual with the skills to speak up like this in crucial moments is essentially motivating the other person to behave differently based on the natural consequences of his or her behaviour - in this case putting others at risk. Those who use this tentative approach, and other crucial conversations skills, find that their colleagues are more willing to listen and solve the problem.

Cultures of Silence vs. Cultures of Safety

Twenty-five years of research into the best practices of communicating in high-risk, highly emotional moments have taught us the problem is not that speaking up doesn't work, it's that speaking up doesn't happen. In these undiscussable moments, when it matters the most, most people do their worst at speaking up skilfully in a way that will be heard. Yet our research reveals that the few who are able to voice their concerns around FLT safety, prevent accidents.

Organisations that train their employees to speak up when faced with the five undiscussables outlined in this report experience dramatic improvements in their safety record. For example, Pride International, a client of VitalSmarts, built a culture of safety where employees held their peers accountable to policies and procedures by speaking up in crucial moments. In the year following their training initiative, the offshore drilling contractor saw a 55 percent drop in their total incident rate and did not report a single accident where employees were required to take time off the job.

As our data and case studies suggest, widespread competence in these skills - along with other sources of influence required to ensure people use the skills - is the missing element of most behavioural safety programmes. When these "silent dangers" become discussable - when the norm changes from ignoring to confronting - the unsafe behaviour stops. According to the Silent Danger research, when people speak up, 82 percent say their actions result in a safer work environment for everyone. The bottom line promise: organisations that align the "below-the-waterline" cultural elements with the "above-the-waterline" formal elements reap huge advances in safety.

So what will it take to move from risky silence to a culture of candor and accountability?

VitalSmarts has spent two decades studying this question. Their research has focused on what it takes to influence rapid, profound, and sustainable change in behaviour in the face of deeply entrenched cultural norms. The results of that research were recognised by MIT Sloan Management Review as the “Change Management Approach of the Year.” This research outlines the six sources of influence leaders must engage in order to influence and sustain the kind of behaviour change we call for here to improve FLT safety - it requires a workforce that is both motivated and able to speak up when any of these five dangers exist.

One of these sources of influence is personal ability. Organisations with strong cultures invest substantial resources in increasing the ability of individual employees to speak up skilfully and hold crucial conversations. But skills aren't all that is needed. The other five sources of influence described in the MIT Sloan Management Review article, when added to effective investments in increased ability, lead to substantial change in a relatively short period of time. And if organisations sustain the sources of influence required to change these behaviours, the new behaviours become the norm.

Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel once said, “All that is needed for evil to triumph is for good people to say nothing.” The future of FLT safety - not to mention the futures of million workers who will otherwise be injured in the coming years - cannot be secured without a deep change in people's ability to step up to and hold the necessary crucial conversations. It is a change in behaviour we are confident will leave organisations twice blessed - with a safer and more productive workplace.

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- Elie Wiesel
Nobel Laureate

We Can Help

We've distilled this high-leverage skill set into the award-winning training programs from VitalSmarts, Crucial Conversations and Crucial Confrontations Training, and the New York Times bestselling books of the same titles. These resources have a proven track record of leading organisations to results, and when safety is in question, results don't just mean improvements in quality, efficiency, or morale - results equate to saved lives.

Organisations need to make improving employees' skills one of their top priorities. The reluctance to speak up and confront colleagues is so deeply rooted in the safety cultures of organisations that it will take a concerted effort to create lasting improvements. Here are a few recommended next steps:

1. **Establish a baseline and a target for improvement.** The fundamental principle of organisational attention is that if you don't measure it, you don't care about it. Survey your organisation to establish a baseline measure of the five crucial conversations for FLT safety and set a clear target for improvement. To help you get started, we've created an organisational assessment that will uncover areas for improvement in FLT safety. Access the assessment, by calling GRA on 01962 779911/22. Update the baseline at least quarterly so people can be rewarded and held accountable for progress.
2. **Teach your employees world-class skills.** A handful of people in your organisation are already speaking up and preventing FLT accidents from occurring around them. Training can be a powerful way to help others speak up and effectively address the five crucial conversations for FLT safety.
3. **Target six sources of influence.** Once you've taught your employees crucial skills, guarantee the success of your training initiative by identifying the few vital behaviours that, if changed, will lead to the FLT safety outcomes you desire. Then, ensure these behaviours are adopted by targeting six sources of influence that both motivate and enable your employees to change. When used appropriately, this influence process will increase your chances of a successful culture change tenfold.

For a complete description of the six sources of influence, as well as instructions for how to apply the "Change Management Approach of the Year" in your organisation, contact us now.

To find out how GRA can help you develop a behavioural safety programme, and build a culture of safety, call us on 01962 779911/22.

Richard Pound
Grahame Robb Associates Ltd
Dolphin House
Abbas Business Centre
Itchen Abbas
Winchester
Hampshire
SO21 1BQ

01962 779911/22
richard@gra.uk.com
www.gra.uk.com



Fork Lift Truck Association

www.fork-truck.org.uk

Grahame Robb  Associates Ltd

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