

Remove Barriers to Participation

Worker participation is critical. Workers often know the most about hazards in the workplace and how to eliminate or reduce them. To fully participate in the program, workers must know their roles and responsibilities and be able to follow the reporting process. They must also feel that their input is welcome, and their voices will be heard. Participation will be low if language, education, and skill level are not considered or if workers fear retaliation.

To-Do

- Learn why workers might hesitate to participate.
- Find ways to remove barriers and follow up to make sure they're gone.

Find barriers to participation and ways to overcome them

Review your assessment of worker participation (Strengthen Worker Participation [2WP_1]). Think about and ask workers what might prevent them from being involved. Some barriers to participation in an activity are easy to identify and remove. Others take more time and effort. See if your workplace might have any of the barriers described below; identify any others. Use these to fill out the table on page 3.

- **Do workers' past experiences discourage participation?** If workers' input was met with ridicule or retaliation, they will be much less open to participating again. The same is true if management didn't acknowledge or act on their input. This barrier will take time and effort to overcome. Going forward, be sure to promptly acknowledge input and let workers know what you'll do about it. If you aren't going to take action, explain why.

Clearly communicate that retaliation against workers for reporting or stopping unsafe conditions is not allowed. Inform workers of their rights under the OSH Act and encourage them to exercise these rights.

- **Are workers uncertain about their roles and responsibilities?** Workers may not realize what role you expect them to play. Communicate this clearly—for example, in your safety and health policy statement or in written job descriptions (see Assign Roles and Responsibilities [1ML_4a]).
- **Do production or staffing pressures get in the way of participating?** Production pressures and staffing shortages are common barriers to participation. Management needs to lead through actions as well as words—for example, by putting safety on the agenda of every meeting or stopping an operation that may be unsafe.

- **Do workers lack the time or resources needed to participate?** Hold safety and health activities during working hours (see Defining Resources Needed [1ML_3a]).
- **Do workers have the training and education they need?** Workers are experts on the tasks they perform, but they also need training and information to recognize safety and health hazards and solutions.
- **Are language or literacy barriers preventing participation?** Decide on a reading level for any written materials. Many word processing programs have tools you can use to check this. Find out which languages your workers read. Consider asking bilingual workers to help make sure other workers understand the materials you provide.
- **Do you have incentives that discourage participation?** Change anything that discourages reporting. For example, you may have rewards for managers or groups reporting zero injuries. Instead, recognize workers who report concerns or make suggestions.

Be sure to revisit your list and follow up to see if you've effectively addressed barriers.



Recognizing a good catch: At one workplace, the CEO sends a note and small gift to any worker who reports a safety concern or near miss. Acknowledging reporting helps overcome any perception that worker input doesn't make a difference.

Activity	Current level of worker participation	Potential barrier(s)	Ways to address barriers
Example: Involve workers in incident investigation.	Workers aren't participating or engaged.	Workers don't have time during the workday to discuss the safety and health program. Workers are skeptical that management will take their input seriously.	Set meeting times to get input during working hours. Follow up and report back to workers.