



TEAM COMMUNICATION DURING HIGH-RISK TASKS

Introduction

On a lifting operation, a rigger signalled the crane operator to “hoist up,” while another worker at the load thought the signal meant “stop.” The confusion caused the load to swing, narrowly missing two crew members.

Miscommunication is one of the leading causes of accidents during high-risk tasks. When heavy machinery, heights, electrical work, or confined spaces are involved, there is no room for mixed messages. Clear communication saves lives.

Why Communication Matters

High-risk tasks often involve multiple people, equipment, and moving parts. A single misunderstanding—like misheard instructions or unclear hand signals—can quickly turn into a serious injury or fatality. Good communication creates shared understanding, coordination, and confidence between team members.

Hazards of Poor Communication

1. **Conflicting Signals** – Operators receive unclear or contradictory instructions.
2. **Assumptions** – Workers act without confirming, leading to unsafe movement or timing.
3. **Noise Interference** – Machinery or background noise prevents clear hearing.
4. **Language Barriers** – Misunderstandings occur when workers don’t share a common language.
5. **Distraction & Fatigue** – Important messages are missed or forgotten.

Control Measures – Building Strong Communication

1. Pre-Task Briefing

- Agree on signals, roles, and responsibilities before starting.
- Identify a single point of contact (e.g., a banksman for lifting tasks).

2. Standardised Signals & Radios

- Use recognised hand signals for cranes, forklifts, and lifting operations.
- Ensure radios are fully charged, tested, and used with confirmation protocols (“repeat-back”).

3. Confirmation Protocols

- Repeat back instructions to confirm you heard correctly.
- Never act on unclear or half-heard communication—ask for clarification.

4. Manage Noise & Distractions

- Step away from noisy machinery for radio/voice communication.
- Use agreed signals instead of shouting.

5. Stop-Work Authority

- Any worker has the right to call a stop if instructions are unclear.
- Restart only once everyone understands the plan.

Discussion Points

- Have you ever seen a near-miss caused by poor communication?
- What hand signals or radio protocols do we use here—and are we consistent?
- How can we make communication clearer when the site is noisy?
- If you’re unsure of an instruction, what should you do?
- How can we improve team communication on today’s high-risk tasks?

