

The RightShip Safety Insights series shares key lessons from maritime incidents, highlights identified gaps and provides leading practices and guidance to help improve standards and reduce risk — supporting our goal of achieving a Zero Harm maritime industry.

This paper addresses issues related to conducting Toolbox Talks onboard ships.

## Observations

While the term “Toolbox Talk” is now widely recognised and understood across the maritime industry, its implementation as an essential risk control measure often falls short of best practice.

When reviewing incident investigation reports involving onboard tasks and work practices, RightShip examines whether a pre-task Toolbox Talk was conducted — and, if so, why it failed to act as an effective barrier to prevent the incident.

In many cases, we have found that Toolbox Talks are being confused with Daily Work Planning meetings. These are distinct and should not be conflated if the benefits of an effective Toolbox Talk are to be fully realised and unwanted incidents avoided.

A Daily Work Planning Meeting covers the tasks that are planned for that day, the relevant times and the resources/equipment/personnel that will be required. This is different from a Toolbox Talk.

Where task specific Toolbox Talks have been held in advance of a task, we find they have often taken place within the Engine Control Room, the Ships Office or even on the Bridge and not at the work site, where hazards such as work site conditions, operating restrictions and other work in vicinity can be fully appreciated and discussed at the same time as checking that personnel know how to use the required equipment and everyone understands each step in the task together with their own personal responsibilities.

### Case Study - Summary of events:

Within a vessel’s machinery space a remotely operated valve was noted to be leaking and required replacement. The valve was around 3m high and required persons to work aloft. At 08:00 the day work Engine Room crew members met with the C/E and 2/E in the Engine Control Room to assign and discuss the days planned jobs. One of those jobs was the isolation and removal of the leaking valve. The job scope and some of the possible risks, including the required isolation and need for a Working Aloft Permit were discussed during the morning meeting.

The required isolations were completed and the Working Aloft Permit issued by the 2/E after the morning coffee break, but the job did not commence until after lunch. Shortly after the job started the crew member sustained serious life changing injuries due to a fall from height from the portable extendable ladder he had been working from.

Investigations revealed that he had not secured his safety harness lanyard to an appropriate strong point, the vertical ladder had not been properly secured and the other crew member who had been assigned to help had gone to the Engine Room Workshop to collect further tools.

While the Incident Investigation report stated that a pre-task Toolbox Talk had been completed (as per requirements of the company’s Safety Management System) it was identified that this was actually the 08:00 Daily Work Planning Meeting that occurred more than 5 hours before the task commenced in the Engine Control Room and did not take place at the work site.

## What good managers do

Proactive risk management steps consistently demonstrated by good managers prevent undesirable occurrences from happening. Toolbox Talks are recognised as an important risk management step.

Key considerations relating to the delivery of an effective Toolbox Talk program/culture are outlined below:

1. Leaders (ship and shore) routinely positively reinforce the value in completing effective Toolbox Talks before commencement of tasks.
2. Leaders (ship and shore) ensure that time is allotted for Toolbox Talks.
3. Safety Management Systems provide clear guidance/instruction covering Toolbox Talk expectations with best practice guidance/instruction including the following:
  - Requirement to perform Toolbox Talks at or near to the worksite, where the risks and environmental conditions can be fully appreciated.
  - Requirement to perform Toolbox Talks shortly before the task commences, when all persons involved are in attendance, wearing the required PPE with the required tools/equipment already gathered and checked to ensure safe and effective use throughout the task.
  - Requirement for Toolbox Talks to be interactive and include a 'walk-through' of the task including demonstration of relevant best practice (e.g. the proper way to tie a rope stopper or how a fall arrestor should be rigged) and clear identification of actual or potential hazards (e.g. fall from height, oxygen depletion, electrical, kinetic energy, potential energy, thermal energy, pressure, expansion or conflicting works).
  - Requirement for Toolbox Talks to confirm/validate that any required isolations are in place and all potential sources of energy have been identified and mitigated as well as the proper steps and precautions are taken during any recommissioning.
  - Requirement to seek positive confirmation that everyone involved in a task understands the risks together with their own roles and responsibilities – This can be incorporated into any 'signing onto the work permit'.
  - Utilisation of opportunity to ensure that all Permit to Work and related Risk Assessment controls are in place and conditions have been met.
  - Reminders that all personnel have a right/obligation to stop a task should they identify a risk or note a change in conditions which affect the validity of a work permit.
4. Onboard safety leaders are provided with structured training on how and when to perform Toolbox Talks.
5. During Officer/Crew Seminars coaching is provided on the effective delivery of meaningful Toolbox Talks using different role play scenarios.
6. Toolbox Talk program/culture delivery effectiveness is periodically assessed by ship and shore leadership personnel with opportunities for improvement discussed and shared.
7. Where opportunities arise, shore management representatives actively participate in Toolbox Talks during ship visits.

Further considerations:

- Toolbox Talks do not need to be documented, as the relevant Work Permit(s) and/or the Risk Assessment(s) ought to provide discussion content, however the completion of a Toolbox Talk should be positively recorded, perhaps within the Risk Assessment, Work Permit, Deck or Engine Logbooks.
- Toolbox Talks should be accounted for within job planning and considered to be part of a task, but they should not be time consuming except if the task is complex, there is significant risk and if multiple permits are applicable.
- Toolbox Talk leaders should ask open ended questions to encourage team discussion – it is intended to be a talk, not a lecture!
- Safety Management System guidance on Toolbox Talk best practice guidance/instruction may be supplemented by handy reference cards, checklist, posters or examples of relevant incidents.
- The importance of effective Toolbox Talks is even greater in cases where there are language barriers, new crew members, contractors or when the task is unusual and includes risks that even a very experienced workforce have seldom encountered.
- When completing a task independently, there is also undeniable value in performing a personal/internal Toolbox Talk just prior to starting a task (sometimes referred to as Take5).

The below images visualise the contrast we continue to observe between what commonly occurs under the guise of a Toolbox Talk versus what represents Toolbox Talk best practice (i.e. at the work site and involving all members of the work team when all required equipment is in place and everyone is wearing the correct PPE).



## Where to find further information

<https://www.nautilusshipping.com/toolbox-talk/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDdSp0fu9c>

<https://www.imca-int.com/product/toolbox-talks-3/>

<https://www.sunderlandmarine.com/publications/safe-home-think-safe-toolbox-talks/>