THE ROLE OF AMBIGUITY
in Stop-Work Authority
By Tim Page-Bottorff

Uncertainty in the workplace is caused by a lack of leadership, systemic acceptance of uncertainty, failure to mitigate it, and not training employees or not sustaining their learning from safety training. This psychosocial risk is known most notably as ambiguity.

The role that ambiguity plays in the workplace is a problem that can contribute to quality, safety and production woes. Take, for example, a manager who asks an employee to show up at 8 a.m. on Monday morning. It sounds simple enough, but the instructions have a certain degree of ambiguity. Does the employee merely have to show up at 8 a.m., or should the employee clock in, be dressed in PPE and have a list of items to be discussed with the manager? The answer: it depends.

The question was ambiguous to begin with, and a lot of blanks need to be filled in to answer questions, such as:

•Have the manager and employee had a previous conversation where these expectations were set?

•Did the employee just start a new job and meet the manager for the first time on a Friday afternoon (and, if so, how much information was the person overloaded with)?

•Are there other individuals, systems or instructions that can offer guidance to the employee?

People can intuit a great deal from a relatively small amount of contextual information. But when our minds are left to fill in too many holes, it can lead to false assumptions, confusing or negative interactions with others and, at times, outright paralysis. How does ambiguity arise? What effects does it have? And, most importantly, what can be done to avoid uncertainty in workplace settings? This article provides answers to these questions as directly and clearly as possible because, as the literature on the matter shows, detail and precision matter.

Research on Ambiguity

While ambiguity can be a positive condition for creative breakthroughs in art, science and business, it is an adverse state in day-to-day work life, and a wide body of research reflects this. The majority of scholarly articles on the subject frame ambiguity as a negative condition and often as a risk. Notably, the concept of ambiguity can be found on a list of psychosocial risks in the ANSI/ASSP/ISO 45003 standard on psychological safety (Table 1). In fact, it appears several times under different terms, including "role ambiguity" and "uncertainty," as well as the ambiguity that potentially stems from "conflicting demands."

According to McNamara (2023), ambiguity is "a type of meaning in which a phrase, statement or resolution is not explicitly defined, making several interpretations plausible. A common aspect of ambiguity is uncertainty." In practical terms, it is reasonable to view uncertainty as a subset of ambiguity, as both result in the same thing when it comes to safety—a lack of clarity that can lead to potentially unsafe actions.

Ambiguity can directly lead to elevated risk levels in several ways, from skewed perceptions of risk to uncertainty about one's ability to speak up about concerning work conditions. Common forms of workplace ambiguity include an employee:

•not knowing how to do something, whether using a specific piece of equipment or completing a specific task, and

•not knowing what to do, whether a condition-based task (e.g., a workstation needs to be cleaned) or a time-specific request that is not clearly understood (e.g., helping another department based on a managerial assessment).

But one case always presents a great deal of risk: ambiguity in situations involving stop-work authority.

TABLE 1
AMBIGUITY AS A PSYCHOSOCIAL RISK

The concept of ambiguity can be found on a list of psychosocial risks in the ANSI/ASSP/ISO 45003 standard on psychological safety.

Examples	
Roles and expectations	• role ambiguity • role conflict • duty of care for other people • scenarios where workers do not have clear guidelines on the tasks they are expected to do (and not do) • expectations within a role that undermine one another (e.g., being expected to provide good customer service, but also to not spend a long time with customers) • uncertainty about, or frequent changes to, tasks and work standards • performing work of little value or purpose
Job control or autonomy	• limited opportunity to participate in decision-making • lack of control over workload • low levels of influence and independence (e.g., not being able to influence the speed, order, or schedule of work tasks and workload)
Job demands	• underuse of skills • continual work exposure to interaction with people (e.g., the public, customers, students, patients) • having too much to do with a certain time or with a set number of workers • conflicting demands and deadlines • unrealistic expectations of a workers' competence or responsibilities • lack of task variety or performing highly repetitive tasks • fragmented or meaningless work

Note. Excerpted from ANSI/ASSP/ISO 45003-2021, Occupational Health and Safety Management—Psychological Health and Safety at Work—Guidelines for Managing Psychosocial Risks (https://store.assp.org/PersonifyEbusiness/Store/Product-Details/productId/227110950).

The process of exercising one's stop-work authority is straightforward, but ambiguity can frustrate that process in many ways. The first is that ambiguity can alter workers' perceptions of whether a situation poses a tangible risk. Johansen and Rausand (2015) found that ambiguity and uncertainty are two of the "defining challenges that compromise the role and value of risk assessment in risk-informed decision-making." They note that ambiguity can affect people's views of risk severity as well as the likelihood of an incident occurring. The result of a skewed risk perception is that workers are less likely to use their stop-work authority.

A lack of basic knowledge, which is a form of ambiguity, can also be in play, as some employees may not know that they have the authority in the first place or may not know how or when they can exercise it.

Social pressures may also create ambiguity that has a dampening effect on workers' willingness to exercise their stop-work authority. This is especially true in environments where workers are unsure of how their attempt to stop work will be received. Will their supervisor ignore them? Will they experience retaliation from peers or supervisors because they have slowed the pace of work? Possessing the legal right to stop work and feeling like it is socially permissible to do so are two different matters, and the latter is particularly prone to the corrosive influence of ambiguity.

The primary danger that ambiguity poses is that it can lead to a failure in the stop-work process. This can be due to either a worker failing to exercise the authority when the individual might otherwise do so, or due to the process being followed incorrectly. In both cases, the risk of injury increases significantly as a result.

The Fear Behind Ambiguity

For many employees, fear is often involved when it comes to taking initiative. And that fear is exacerbated when they believe that they have a leader who might respond in a volatile, overly complex or confusing manner when an employee behaves in a way that oversteps the behavioral norm of their role. As such, ambiguity can have a dampening effect on employees' willingness to take initiative.

It also makes employees more prone to not asking questions when faced with ambiguity. In an effort to "not bother the boss," often due to fear of repercussions, employees may avoid asking questions that might resolve their uncertainty.

A common pattern exists in many workplaces: Uncertainty leads to fear, fear leads to paralysis, then paralysis leads to further ambiguity. This pattern can be avoided when leaders offer direct, detailed and precise communications (Mase, 2022). Establishing a rapport with workers can also mitigate the ambiguity-generating effects of volatile, overly complex, or confusing leadership and provide new levels of trust.

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Relationships May Help Mitigate the Risk of Ambiguity

McNamara (2023) notes that it can be incredibly valuable to offer professional development opportunities to managerial staff. Many organizational leaders lack the ability to develop relationships with their direct reports, the ability to be precise in providing directions to employees, and the skills to empathize with unique employee needs, among others (Howard, 2019). Managers can often benefit most from professional development opportunities to improve their soft skills or interpersonal skills.

It is a well-known truism that employees do not leave their jobs, they leave their supervisors. Author Rodd Wagner (2022) has found that to be the case, and his research has revealed that happiness is a critical ingredient to both job satisfaction and reducing risk factors in the workplace.

In the same vein, Rosa Antonia Carrillo (2019) explains that relationships are the bridge to building better psychologically safe workplaces that maximize employee satisfaction and

reduce ambiguity. And building strong relationships with employees necessitates a certain degree of soft skills.

Given all this, this author has found that several vital soft skills contribute to better worker-supervisor relationships and, along the way, do a good job of mitigating ambiguity and generally improving workers' willingness to exercise their stop-work authority at appropriate times. These soft skills include:
- conveying empathy,
- consistency,
- relatability and storytelling,
- reading the social situation,
- delegation and empowerment,
- positivity, and
- human factors management.

When supervisors develop and hone these soft skills, they can more capably reduce social ambiguity and increase the degree of trust they engender among workers. This also improves their ability to communicate clearly and effectively, which can further reduce ambiguity on a day-to-day basis. This list is hardly exhaustive and the interpersonal skills identified by others, such as those outlined by Bryce and Patrowny (2021), can also have a positive effect on ambiguity.

Next Steps

Safety professionals can take several concrete steps to reduce the pressure that ambiguity exerts on stop-work authority and other safety procedures in their workplace. Following the ANSI/ASSP/ISO 45003 recommendations, the first step is to identify when and where ambiguity can be a risk in the workplace.

Many tools can help safety professionals identify these issues, including surveys, focus groups, interviews, and other assessment and diagnostic tools, as well as Gemba walks, inspections and third-party assessments. Employees can always participate in this step, which can go a long way toward fostering a sense of inclusion and lead to stronger safety relationships.

At that point, begin addressing the various sources of ambiguity, uncertainty and confusion that have been identified. In some cases, this will be a matter of updating signage and checklists, or rewording instructions. But in all instances, it is worth confirming with workers that any changes made to written or visual material are clear and do not introduce a new issue.

But keep in mind that many sources of ambiguity will be individual or

interpersonal—that is, individual workers who are unsure of what to do, or social dynamics that inadvertently create a cloud of uncertainty. In these cases, it is a matter of developing soft skills among supervisors, having more frequent conversations with workers to monitor ambiguity levels and taking extra time when giving directions to crew members. It is also worth considering whether additional human factors are amplifying the effects of ambiguity.

The end goal is to encourage managers and frontline supervisors to more consistently offer precise directions, build better relationships with employees and more actively identify moments of ambiguity that can be addressed proactively. **PSJ**

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