

The power of listening to help the rail industry and its workers thrive

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*Catherine Baker, Director of **CIRAS**, discusses the importance of listening in promoting an inclusive, safe and healthy workplace.*

Whatever we do in the rail industry, it is important that we listen to colleagues. Whether it is to fully understand instructions for the job ahead, or hearing the shout of ‘watch out’ from a colleague warning you of a trip hazard, listening well can keep us all safe.

Despite its importance, and however objective and open we think we are, we don’t always hear what people are trying to say. This can have a detrimental impact on the industry and its people and even lead to accidents and fatalities.

For the last 25 years, the **Confidential Incident Reporting and Analysis Service (CIRAS)** has been listening

to the health, wellbeing and safety concerns of workers when they don't feel they can use internal reporting channels or have tried without success.

Catherine Baker believes listening has a vital role to play in promoting an inclusive workplace, which in turn is a vital prerequisite for a positive health and safety culture.

"Have you ever proofread your own work and then somebody else picks up a glaring error that you've missed? Because I think listening is a little bit like that," she said.

"If I'm an expert in a process, system or asset and someone raises a query or concern about it, I hear them through the filters of my own experience.

"This can be a good thing, but equally there is a possibility that I don't really hear something that I'm not expecting, in the same way that we don't always spot mistakes when proofreading our own work. As an independent listener, CIRAS takes the time to really understand what the concern is without those filters, so we can hear things that wouldn't get picked up otherwise.

"It isn't a criticism of anybody, it is just a human characteristic that it can be really difficult to listen, even though it is something we do every day."

Catherine, who joined **CIRAS** in January 2018, is passionate that listening to diverse voices will lead to safer workplaces and that it is something we need to do better.

This was highlighted in the Rail Accident Investigation Branch 2020 annual report, which said "racial, language and cultural tensions were factors in the accident" at Rochford (two people were injured in a collision between mobile elevating work platforms).

"What's brilliant to see is the rail sector becoming more diverse and inclusive, but what we are keenly aware of at CIRAS is that an individual's willingness to speak up and indeed their likelihood of being heard is still affected by their background, their identity, their experiences," she said.

"But at the same time, that diversity of perspective is exactly what we need to stop the next hazard that no one else has spotted. Here lies the challenge.

Confidential reporting is one way we can lower the barriers to someone being prepared to speak out, and free the listener from unconscious bias relating to who raised the issue."

Catherine is encouraging organisations to pause when they do hear concerns from someone – whether it be informally in a car park, formally through the internal system or through CIRAS – so they can ensure that person is listened to and that listening leads to action.

She said: "It is such a powerful message to an employee that they are being listened to and what they say matters.

"If an organisation promotes that listening – open-door policies, days when senior staff walk around the

frontline, promoting confidential reporting – it demonstrates a real sense that they want to hear and they're not afraid of what people are going to say, and I think that's really important.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic I have definitely seen evidence of positive indicators when it comes to listening, whether that's organisations that have changed the way that they talk within their organisation, their channels, or perceptions of reporting culture.

“At the same time there have been indications of a suppression in the reporting of concerns that didn't relate to COVID-19. Quite rightly, lots of organisations have been really focussed on managing that risk, but the relative scale of reporting other issues seemed to have fallen away.

“One of the challenges we face now is how we all work together to make absolutely sure that we are not missing things.”

From small beginnings as a charity in 1996 working with a train operator to bring the safety concerns of frontline staff to light, CIRAS has partnered with the mainline railway in the UK helping with significant improvement in safety performance.

The confidential reporting service is now widely used across transport and infrastructure, welcoming members from sectors spanning construction, transport operators – including bus, light rail, tram, urban metros and mainline rail – the transport supply chain, highways and ports.

“The key message for organisations is that it always starts with listening, because the person who recognises the problems needs to know they will be listened to – otherwise, why bother?” Catherine said.

“Looking to the future of CIRAS, the priority is to continue working closely with all our members to enable speaking up and listening. It has been turbulent in the rail industry over the last 18 months, and there is more change to come.

“Whether it is the post pandemic adjustment, or the Williams-Shapps Review, there is much reshaping to come. Change can drive uncertainties in people and that can affect reporting behaviours, so there is work for us to do in making sure that all voices keep being heard through this period of time and beyond.

“There is also an opportunity to continue shifting the culture of listening in organisations so that workers feel more able to speak up.

“We will keep looking at how we can offer our services more broadly to more of the workforce across the transport sector too, because we have seen the valuable difference that confidential reporting can make.”

Visit ciras.org.uk for more details.

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