

# Toolbox Talk for students

When the Culture Around You  
Doesn't Feel Right



**Time:** 15 minutes

**Objective:** To help learners recognise when poor treatment or unsafe behaviour is becoming normalised, understand why speaking up can feel difficult and feel more confident finding support when something does not feel right.

Imagine starting a placement or apprenticeship and noticing something that does not feel right. Perhaps people regularly ignore a safety rule, one person is constantly humiliated or you are told to complete a task you have not been trained to do. When you question it, somebody says, “That’s just how things are here” or “Don’t make a fuss.” You are new, you want to fit in and you do not want to risk the opportunity, so you begin wondering whether you should stay quiet. That is one of the hardest things about an unhealthy culture: when poor behaviour happens often enough, people can start treating it as normal.

### Why It Matters

Culture simply means the way people usually behave and what a group accepts. A healthy culture does not mean everybody agrees all the time or that nothing ever goes wrong. It means people can ask questions, admit mistakes, raise safety concerns and expect to be treated with basic respect. Construction can offer supportive teams, good friendships and experienced people who take pride in helping apprentices learn. New learners may be especially unsure about what is normal because they have less experience. When people feel pressure to stay quiet, small concerns can grow. Unsafe shortcuts may continue, poor treatment may spread and people may stop asking questions. This can affect confidence, learning, wellbeing and safety. Recognising an unhealthy culture is not about judging an entire workplace after one difficult day. It is about paying attention to repeated patterns and what happens when somebody raises a genuine concern.

### What It Can Look Like

An unhealthy culture can include repeated shouting, humiliation, threats, discrimination or deliberately excluding somebody.



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It might involve people being mocked for asking questions, mistakes being hidden to avoid blame or apprentices being expected to accept treatment that would not be aimed at more experienced workers. It can also show up through unsafe behaviour. Someone may be pressured to use equipment without training, ignore protective equipment, rush a task, work when they are not fit to do so or stay silent about an incident.

You may notice changes in yourself. You might feel tense before every shift, constantly worry about upsetting somebody or begin doubting your own judgement. You could stop speaking in meetings, avoid reporting mistakes or agree to things that make you uncomfortable because saying no feels risky. Not every firm instruction, disagreement or uncomfortable piece of feedback means a culture is toxic. Workplaces need standards, deadlines and honest conversations. The concern is when disrespect or unsafe behaviour becomes repeated, accepted and difficult to challenge without fear of punishment or ridicule.

### What Can Help

Start by taking your concern seriously enough to check it. Ask yourself what happened, whether it is part of a pattern and whether somebody's safety, dignity or wellbeing could be affected. If you are unsure, speak privately to someone with more experience outside the immediate situation. When it feels safe, ask a clear question rather than pretending to understand. You could say, "I haven't been trained to do that yet. Can somebody show me?" "Can we check the safe way to complete this?" or "I'm not comfortable continuing until this has been checked."



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If there is an immediate risk of harm, stop what you are doing, move to a safe place and tell the appropriate person. For repeated poor treatment or concerns that are dismissed, keep a factual note of what happened, when it happened, who was present and what was said. Save relevant messages or emails. Focus on the facts rather than trying to label the whole workplace.

Speak to somebody you trust. This might be a tutor, lecturer, placement coordinator, apprenticeship adviser, supervisor, safeguarding lead, health and safety representative or trade union representative. Explain what has happened and what support you need. If the first person does not take a serious concern properly, speak to another appropriate person.

If you see somebody else being treated poorly, avoid joining in or staying silent simply because everyone else does. Check in with them privately, ask what support they want and be honest about what you witnessed. You are not expected to handle the whole situation yourself.

### **Preparing for Life in Construction**

The strongest construction teams are not the ones where nobody ever questions anything. They are the ones where people can raise concerns, learn from mistakes and carry out work safely. Apprentices and new starters often notice things that others have become used to and a respectful question can be valuable.

You can also influence culture through your own behaviour. How you speak to people, respond to mistakes, include someone new and react when a concern is raised all matter. You may not control the whole environment but you can decide what behaviour you will contribute to and when you need support.



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## Discussion Questions

- What behaviours help create a healthy learning or working culture?
- Why might a learner or apprentice find it difficult to speak up?
- What options could somebody use if their first concern was dismissed?

## Takeaway Message

Something being common does not automatically make it acceptable. If poor treatment or unsafe behaviour keeps happening and people feel unable to question it, the culture needs attention. You do not have to challenge everything alone or put yourself at risk. Notice the pattern, trust your concerns enough to check them and involve somebody who can support you.

## Action

Choose one sentence from this talk that you could use if a task or situation did not feel right. Practise saying it clearly now, so the words are easier to find if you ever need them.



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