Pause When Unsure

Todd Jerome Jenkins | v2.0 | October 13, 2026 | 5–10 minutes plus field checks

What and why

Pause when unsure means holding the affected action when the plan, conditions or result no longer makes sense. Maintain the required protection, explain the uncertainty and bring in the right help. Continuing through uncertainty can make a problem harder to recover from. A useful pause gives people time and support to establish what is happening before the next action.

Objective: Explain an uncertainty, identify the safe hold and name the evidence and authority needed for restart.

When and where

Use it when instructions conflict, a result is unexpected, a needed condition is unverified or anyone raises a concern that remains unresolved. Wherever the uncertainty is noticed: planning, an office, a service location or the work area. Use the task's safe hold or shutdown method; simply walking away may be unsafe.

How to use it

- State the mismatch and hold the affected action using the task's safe method. Maintain protections and any needed monitoring.
- Notify the designated leader and obtain the required knowledgeable help. Use the backup contact if needed; tell affected people what remains held.
- Resolve the issue against the applicable instruction and actual conditions. Recheck protection and obtain required restart authorization; rebrief affected people.

Verify It in the Field

Locate the actual safe hold arrangement, help route and restart requirements. Confirm the required contact is reachable; a name on a list is insufficient.

Paper practice: one mock instruction says use Room A; another says Room B. State the conflict, keep the paper task held and identify who can resolve the instruction.

Ask the facilitator for the corrected instruction and its approval basis. Explain what permits restart. Record the real correction, recheck result, checker and time separately.

Failure points and stop triggers

Pressure to continue; dismissed concerns; improvised shutdown; unavailable help; restart based only on reassurance. Keep affected work held while the uncertainty or missing protection remains. Escalate if the safe hold cannot be maintained. Do not improvise equipment movements or bypass the task's emergency response.

Toolbox talk questions

1. What would make us pause today?

2. What must remain protected during the pause?

3. Who resolves the concern and who authorizes restart?

Use the separate supervisor field check and attendance sheet. Practice is not qualification or work authorization.

Source: DOE-HDBK-1028-2009, Vol. 2, printed pp. 16–17. References and task-specific limits on the webpage.

Next step: Apply this skill to one step on the free JHA/JSA field-verification worksheet.

Expanded guidance and separate forms: toddjeromejenkins.com/toolbox-talks/pause-when-unsure-safe-restart

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