Toolbox Talk - Observing Work to Learn

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

What and why

Work observation studies how people, equipment, instructions and conditions interact. Watching actions without asking about the conditions can miss the reason a task is difficult.

Objective: Describe an observed condition, ask an open question and agree a useful follow-up.

When and where

During planned learning visits and after reports of recurring work difficulties. From a safe position, with the people who perform the work.

How to use it

- Agree the purpose, safe timing and observation boundary with the team.
- Study one task step and its resources. Ask what helps and what makes it difficult.
- Separate what you saw from your interpretation. Confirm understanding and assign follow-up.

Verify It in the Field

Select one required control and review its actual condition or authorized test result against the governing source.

Paper practice: a worker walks away repeatedly to collect supplies. List observations before suggesting causes.

Ask what changed and what is needed. Success means a factual note and an agreed action, not a label.

Failure points and stop triggers

Interrupting critical work; labeling people; staged demonstrations; recording without follow-through. Pause observation if it distracts critical work. Use the site’s safe response for missing protection; do not continue exposure to gather evidence.

Toolbox talk questions

1. What did we observe directly?

2. What explanation have we assumed?

3. How will we know the change helped?

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. 73–74. 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/work-observation-conditions-before-judgment

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