Toolbox Talk - Designing Work to Tolerate Mistakes

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

What and why

Error-tolerant work limits how a plausible mistake can lead to harm through suitable task and equipment design. A missed cue or wrong selection can reveal a weakness in the work's protection. Use one plausible slip to ask what prevents harm.

Objective: Trace a plausible slip to its possible exposure and identify evidence that an approved control interrupts that path.

When and where

During planning, after a confusing action or when a control depends entirely on remembering. In physical tasks and information workflows, with changes reviewed by the responsible authority.

How to use it

- Trace one plausible slip to the exposure it could create. Describe the work conditions without blaming a person.
- Consider approved ways to remove the hazard or interrupt that path. Obtain appropriate design and technical review.
- Maintain existing protection until the changed arrangement is approved and verified. Never demonstrate a mistake on live equipment.

Verify It in the Field

On paper, draw an unintended selection, its consequence and a proposed barrier. Ask whether the barrier depends on the same selection.

For real work, locate the design or manufacturer criterion and prescribed safe check. Only authorized people perform it.

Record the actual result and remaining restrictions. Include user review of the changed task and any new exposure it introduces.

Failure points and stop triggers

A harmful outcome prevented only by memory; one confusing selection reaching dangerous equipment; assumed safeguards; a control bypassed for convenience; an improvement that creates another hazard; unsafe demonstrations. Hold affected work when a required safeguard is absent, failed or unverified, or the proposed method depends on an unauthorized workaround. Protect people and seek the appropriate technical decision.

Toolbox talk questions

1. Which plausible slip could expose someone here?

2. What protects people if that slip occurs?

3. What evidence establishes that protection without creating exposure?

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

Source: DOE-HDBK-1028-2009, Vol. 1, printed pp. 1-19–1-20. 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/error-tolerant-work-design-toolbox-talk

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