Toolbox Talk - Recognizing Confusing Controls

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

What and why

This skill identifies design features that make the intended action unclear and routes them for authorized improvement. Two similar controls, an unreadable label or a display that hides important information can make the wrong action easier. Repeated reminders do not remove that problem.

Objective: Identify one interface problem and trace it to an authorized correction, safe interim arrangement and user review.

When and where

When labels, displays or neighboring controls cause hesitation or repeated selection concerns. At equipment, software interfaces and workstations, using safe observation or approved training images.

How to use it

- Describe the exact feature and conditions causing confusion. Include operating and maintenance users.
- Hold uncertain actions and use approved interim protection. Do not try a likely control to discover its function.
- Route design changes through the authorized owner. Update affected instructions and training after approved correction.

Verify It in the Field

Use a fictional screen with two similar labels. Ask users what information they need; do not test them on live controls.

Record the real ambiguity from safe access and confirm an owner and interim restriction. A submitted request is not a correction.

After authorized change, involve users in the approved review. Record governing criteria, safe checks, findings and release status.

Failure points and stop triggers

Similar controls; unclear labels; poor visibility; inconsistent displays; improvised markings; a change that creates a different error. Pause affected use for uncertain identity, unreadable essential information or an unauthorized change. Escalate recurring confusion.

Toolbox talk questions

1. Which feature makes the intended action unclear?

2. Who can authorize a durable correction?

3. How will users safely confirm the improvement?

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. 5-4–5-6. 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/confusing-equipment-controls-design-traps

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