

COMMS SENSE

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Safety Critical Communication

Improving Rail Safety Through Clear and Consistent Communication

Safety Critical communication remains one of the most powerful controls we have in preventing incidents across the rail network. Whether we are authorising movements, protecting worksites, or responding to incidents, the clarity and accuracy of our communication directly influence the safety of our people, passengers and operations.

This update focuses on two critical components of effective communication: **Repeating Safety Critical Information** and the **Phonetic Alphabet**.

Repeating Safety Critical Information

Repeating instructions to a sender is a critical step in confirming that messages have been correctly understood. It is not enough to hear an instruction; it must be verified.

Why is it important:

- Confirms mutual understanding between Sender and Receiver
- Provides an opportunity to catch and correct errors immediately
- Reinforces accountability in safety critical communication.

Good practices:

- Always repeat back safety critical instructions.
- Wait for confirmation from the sender that your repeat back is correct.
- If anything is unclear, ask for clarification, never assume.

Lessons Learnt

A recent review highlighted the vital importance of this protocol. A Protection Officer correctly repeated back an instruction that didn't match what the Signaller actually intended. This discrepancy prompted an immediate re-check of the section, which revealed a track vehicle was still within the section, a detail that had been overlooked. Because the Protection Officer repeated the communication, an unsafe movement was prevented, and a potential incident was avoided.

The Takeaway: *Correctly repeating safety critical information is one of our strongest safety defences. Use it every time.*

Use of Phonetic Alphabet

Rail environments are often noisy, fast paced and subject to interference. In these conditions, similar sounding letters or words can easily be misheard. The phonetic alphabet (e.g. Alpha, Bravo, Charlie) is designed to eliminate ambiguity and ensure that critical information is conveyed accurately.

Why is it important:

- Prevents confusion between similar sounding letters (e.g. "B" and "D")
- Improved clarity over radio and communication systems
- Reduces the risk of errors in Signal numbers and instructions.

Good practices:

- Always use the phonetic alphabet when spelling out identifiers such as train numbers, track vehicle numbers, signal numbers and if necessary to spell words.
- Speak clearly at a steady pace pausing slightly between words and letters if needed.
- Avoid shortcuts or informal language even when under time pressure.

Lessons Learnt

During a recent audio review of communications between a Driver and Signaller, the Driver did not use the phonetic alphabet when identifying a signal number, communicating 3.22 instead of SIERRA 3.22.

By not correctly identifying the signal including the use of the phonetic alphabet to describe the signal number prefix, increased the potential for the signal to be confused with similarly numbered signals in the area.

The Takeaway: *Using the phonetic alphabet isn't optional. It is essential in safety critical communication.*

[Click the link to watch the phonetic alphabet clip](#)

Refer to your knowledge of Network Rule & Procedures:

- [NGE 204 Network communication](#)
- [NPR 721 Spoken and written communication](#)

Feedback/Questions Email to:

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