

CHAPTER 3

Where Do You Begin?

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WHERE DO YOU BEGIN?



The most difficult workplace hazards can only be eliminated when workers take collective action. The best way to begin is to find out what is important to your co-workers. Workers' families and the neighbors of a factory can also contribute valuable experience and views, so talk with them, too.

Talk with your co-workers

Workers usually gather the best information about worksite problems by talking to each other. There are many ways to do this. The 5 activities shown in this chapter are ideas for you to consider. Try these activities and adapt them to fit your situation. When choosing an activity, think about

- which activity is best for the kind of information you want to gather right now?
- which activity will create a network for communication among co-workers?
- which activity do you and your co-workers have time for?
- which activity will get workers excited about organizing for change?

The 5 activities that follow can be adapted to many situations. Each activity is better for some uses than others. For example:

Talking with co-workers in small groups is best when workers have not talked together about work concerns and may not feel comfortable talking in front of other people. This can be especially useful if workers come from different cultural, language, racial or immigrant groups. You can meet with small groups of people to build relationships. Over time the groups you talk with can be larger and include workers from different backgrounds together.



The first step to organize workers is to talk about common concerns.

Surveying a group of workers helps build the communication skills of the people on the survey team. A survey also builds a relationship among the survey team members and between each team member and the co-workers they talk with.

A survey is most useful for gathering the same information from many people because everyone on the survey team asks the same questions. A survey is most useful for collecting answers to concrete questions, for example, how many hours a person worked last week, what a person was paid last week, or if a supervisor limits time at the toilet.

Surveys are less useful for collecting complex information about feelings or issues people are not comfortable talking about. Those issues are best talked about in a group.

Mapping activities: Group activities such as the 3 map-making activities in this section are good for sharing experiences among workers. From sharing experiences and concerns, the group can more easily agree on solutions and priorities for taking action together.

These mapping activities can be used in the following order as workers get to know each other. But they can be used alone or in another order, too.

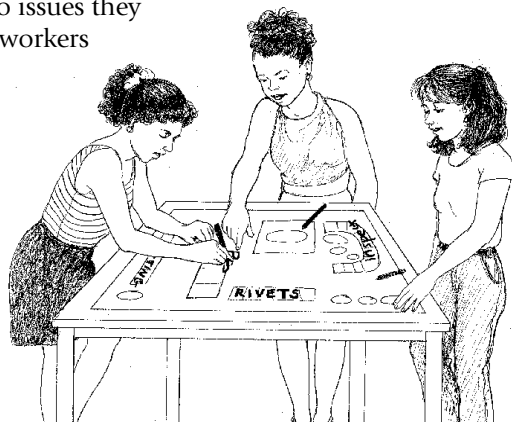
Body mapping is useful to get workers talking about personal experience because it starts with how they feel at work. Everyone in a factory can contribute to the map and talk about their experience. Direct experience is the natural starting point for asking people about problems at work. Discussing the link between these experiences and their causes leads to talking about making changes to improve conditions at work.

MAPPING WORK DANGERS IN MEXICO

Organizers with the Alianza Fronteriza de Obreras (ALFO) in Agua Prieta and Nogales, Mexico, use work hazard mapping in their work. ALFO is a small organization that supports workers organizing unions in EPZs along the Mexico-US border. ALFO focuses on the two issues they have found the workers are most interested in: workers rights and laws, and worker health and safety problems.

Since the workers are most interested in learning about their rights, ALFO organizes workshops on this. After learning their rights, many workers want to learn ways to make their jobs safer. Workers and organizers then discuss work dangers, and the workers draw a map showing the dangers in their own factory. Then they discuss which dangers are most important to most workers and how to reduce the danger. Next they plan an organizing campaign.

The workers come mainly from factories making clothing and electronic equipment. Regardless of the factory, AFLO has found workers in their area are most concerned about strains, sprains, and chemicals.



Worksite hazard mapping is useful when workers are comfortable talking with each other about problems at work. Making a hazard map focuses the group on specific problems in the factory and on specific solutions for them.

Work-life mapping shows how working in the factory affects the homes and community of a group of workers. A work-life map can help workers talk with community groups about the links between the factory and overall community life. Showing these connections can help persuade neighbors and community groups to support workers in a campaign to improve conditions in the factory. The map may show that community and workers' groups need to create programs in the community to address workers' needs at home.

Talk in small groups



Meet: Get a few workers together in a place where all of you feel comfortable talking about work problems.

Talk about concerns: Start the conversation by mentioning a hazard you are concerned about or just ask what concerns they have.

Listen for hazards and solutions: Listen carefully to the hazards and concerns each person mentions. Listen for the most common hazards and if different concerns affect different kinds of people. Listen for ways to fix the hazards, too.

Write it down: To help remember everyone's concerns and solutions, write them down afterwards.

Summarize the results: After you have talked to enough workers, summarize what you have learned by answering questions such as: Which hazards are common to many workers? Which hazards are felt by only one group of workers? Which cause the most serious health problems?

Survey many workers



Meet: Ask several co-workers to help you. Get together with them in a place where all of you feel comfortable talking about work problems.

Talk about concerns: Work with this team to make a list of questions you would like to ask many co-workers. Start by talking as a group about the health hazards at work you are most concerned about. From this discussion choose a few common hazards and decide what kind of information you need from your co-workers.

Write survey questions: Make a short list of questions about the hazards, workers' attitudes toward them, and workers' priorities for eliminating dangers at work. To make sure everyone can understand the questions, have a few co-workers who did not help write the questions try to answer them. If they find the questions confusing or have difficulty answering, ask what was confusing or unclear, and how you could make the questions better. Rewrite the questions until you are satisfied.

Plan the survey: Decide how many workers each of you will survey using these questions. Set a time for the team to meet and check on progress.

Do the survey: Team members go to the workers they agreed to survey. Since many workers cannot read well, it may be best to ask the questions in person and listen to their answers, rather than ask a worker to read the questions and write down answers. If possible, write down the main points of the answer each worker gives.

Check in with each other: When the team meets again, have each person share the most fun and interesting people they surveyed, and the most difficult people. Pay special attention to team members having difficulty so they learn ways to make surveying easier.

Summarize the results: When you think you have enough information, summarize what the team has learned by answering questions such as: Which hazards are common to many workers? Which hazards are felt by only one group of workers? Which cause the most serious health problems?

Make a body map



Meet: Gather a group of co-workers and something to draw on that everyone can see. A large piece of paper and a marking pen, a chalkboard and chalk, or a smooth area of soft soil and pebbles or nuts will all work.

Draw an outline for the body map: Draw the outline of a human body on the paper, chalkboard, or earth.

Mark and talk about pains: Ask people to mark the places on the body drawing where they feel pain from work. After people mark the "body map" ask each one to explain why he put the mark where he did. What pain does he have? What work tasks cause this pain? What hazards cause this pain? After each person does this, find out if other people have the same pain.

Discuss hazards and solutions: After everyone has spoken, discuss which hazards affect the most people or which hazards are the most serious and need to be fixed first. Ask for ideas on the ways you can fix these problems together.

Write it down: If you can, take notes about the pains people describe, the hazards that cause the pain, and solutions.

Options: If you have several colors of marking pens, pebbles, or nuts you can use a different color for different kinds of hazards (such as red for chemicals, yellow for strains, and blue for stress). Or, have the workers from each work area use the same color to see if they share the same problems.

Make a work hazard map



Meet: Gather a small group of co-workers in a place where all of you feel comfortable talking about hazards at work. Lay a large piece of paper and marking pens in several colors on a table (or use a chalkboard and chalk). The group will draw a simple map of hazards of their work site on this paper.

Draw an outline for the hazard map: Ask the group to draw an outline of the factory as if you were looking down through the roof of the building from the sky. Include the walls, doors, and windows. Note the work areas, workstations, machines, or anything else that makes sense to the group.

Mark and talk about hazards: Next, ask the group to mark the health and safety hazards of their work on this “map” using the other colors of marker or chalk. For example, use red to mark where there are physical hazards such as fire, electrical wires, slippery floors, bad stairs, etc. Use blue to mark where chemicals are used and dust created. Use orange to show where the job tasks strain, sprain or overuse their

bodies. Use yellow to mark biological hazards such as contaminated food and water, or dirty bathrooms. Use green to mark where workers feel stress because of threats, harassment, and unfair treatment. Choose a way of grouping hazards that shows the situation at your worksite.

One more look: Have the group look over the map and ask if any important hazard is missing. Add it to the map with words, colors or a drawing.

Summarize the hazards: Help the group summarize the hazards shown on the map by asking questions such as: Which hazards are common to many workers? Which hazards are felt by only one group of workers? Which hazards cause the most serious health problems?

For large groups: Divide into several small groups so each group can create and discuss their own map. Have each group explain their map to the other groups as a way to share different views of the same work place.

Make a work-life map



Meet: Gather a small group of co-workers in a place where all of you feel comfortable talking about work. Hang a large piece of paper on the wall or use a chalkboard and chalk.

Draw an outline for the work-life map: In the center of the paper, draw a small figure of a person. The figure represents the workers drawing this picture.

Draw and explain how work affects health: Ask the group to think about the ways their job affects their life and health outside the factory. Then ask every person to show these effects by drawing pictures or words around the worker-figure on the paper. After everyone has marked

the page, ask each person to explain what effects they added to the drawing and why.

One more look: Review the effects shown on the drawing and ask if any important effect is missing. Add it to the map.

Summarize the connections: Help the group discuss the links between work and personal life by asking questions such as: Which effects are the most serious, the most common, or the most irritating? Which effects are the most important for specific groups (such as mothers, single women, migrant workers, etc.)?

Analyze as a group what you heard

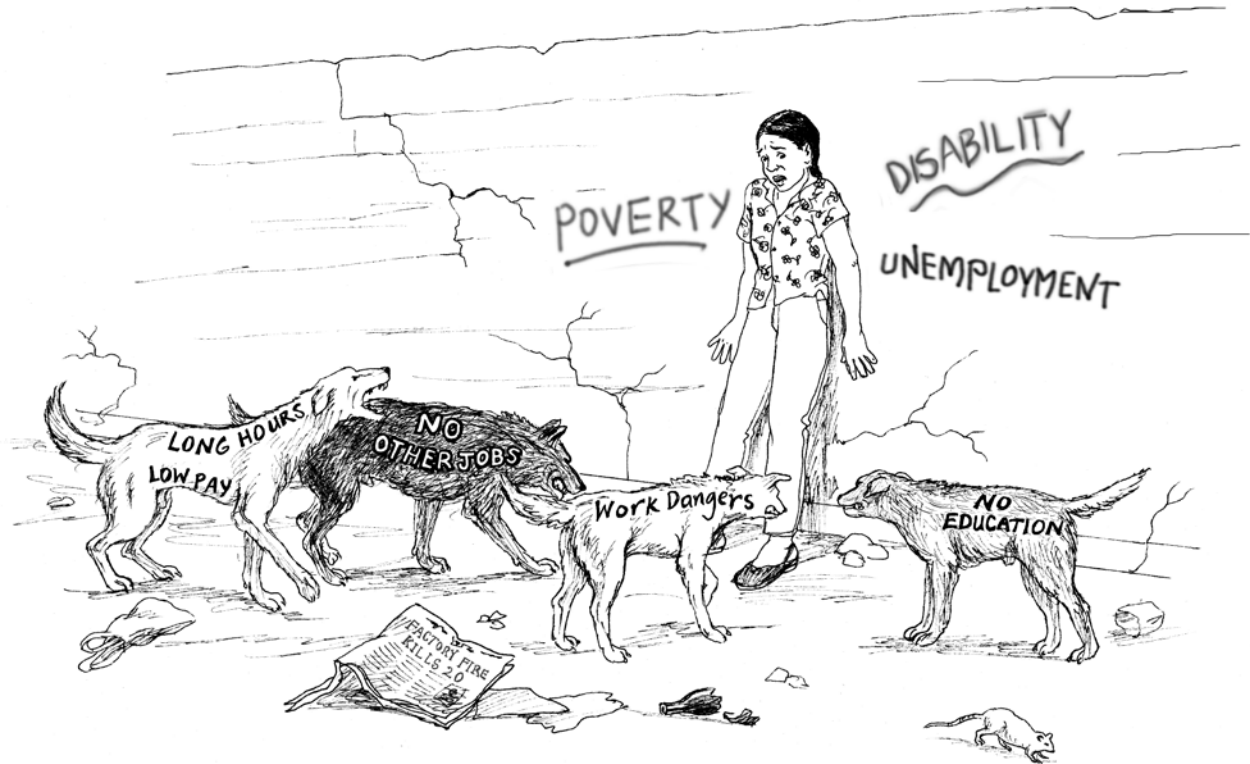
After you have collected information through talking, surveys, or maps, look for patterns in the answers by asking questions like these:

- Are there problems all workers share?
- What problem will most workers get excited to fix?
- Do some problems affect only a few workers?
- Do some work areas have specific problems not shared by others?
- Which problems are the most serious?
- What problem will most interest key leaders in the community?
- What solutions can be won easily?
- Do men and women mention different problems?
- Do workers who have children have different problems than workers who are not parents?

Share what you have learned

Be sure to share this information with other workers, especially those who share their ideas and concerns with you. Talking with your co-workers is the first step towards fixing these problems. Keeping them informed will help get them involved. Also share the information with allies in the community such as church groups, women's groups or neighborhood organizations.





The root causes of worker health problems

A workplace health problem can have many causes. Workers are not to blame for causing their own injury or illness. Some causes are clearly and directly related to a health problem. Some causes are indirect, but are just as important as the direct causes. Sometimes a worker has control over the cause of a health problem, but other times the cause is out of his control. Understanding the root causes of a problem can help you see options to prevent it from happening again. For an example of this, consider Juanita's story.

Juanita's story

Juanita was a sewing machine operator for 5 years. In the factory, she worked very fast with her hands to sew the same seams about 800 times each day. When she sewed, her fingers and hands grasped, pinched, twisted, pushed, and pulled clothing parts, bundles, bins, and tools. She worked 10 hours each day, six days each week, sometimes more. The work pace was very fast, and her supervisors constantly pushed her to do more.



Her wrists and forearms were sore for several years, but she could still work so she did not worry. She knew the pain was due to the work because the few times she took time off work to visit her family, her hands felt better. Eventually, the pain got so bad she had trouble sleeping. Her hands were weaker and painful, so it was difficult for her to carry water, prepare food, and do other house chores.

She knew other workers had pain like hers. No one knew what to do other than hope it would go away. She finally asked to see the doctor, but her supervisor said, "No! Get back to work." So, she went to a doctor after work. He told her to rest and take some pills for the pain. She could not afford the pills, but she bought them. The pills helped her keep working for two more months. Then she could not work fast enough to make the quota and she was fired.

Juanita is not sure what she will do to survive if she cannot sew any more. She has no other job skills because she only went to school for a few years. In her family, only her brothers stayed in school and learned skills for work. She might be able to get work cleaning houses, but that pays less than sewing and is hard work, too. She hopes rest will let her hands heal so she can work again soon.

Look for root causes

Juanita's co-workers worried about what would happen to her and what could happen to them if they were injured too. Carmen used to be a health promoter in her village before she came to work in the factory. She learned how to help people in the village solve health problems by identifying the conditions that created the problems. Carmen invited Juanita and some other women to her house to talk about Juanita's problem. Carmen began by asking the women why Juanita's hands hurt, and after the answer, asked "But why?" again. As the workers talked, they uncovered many causes for Juanita's problems.



Asking “But Why?”

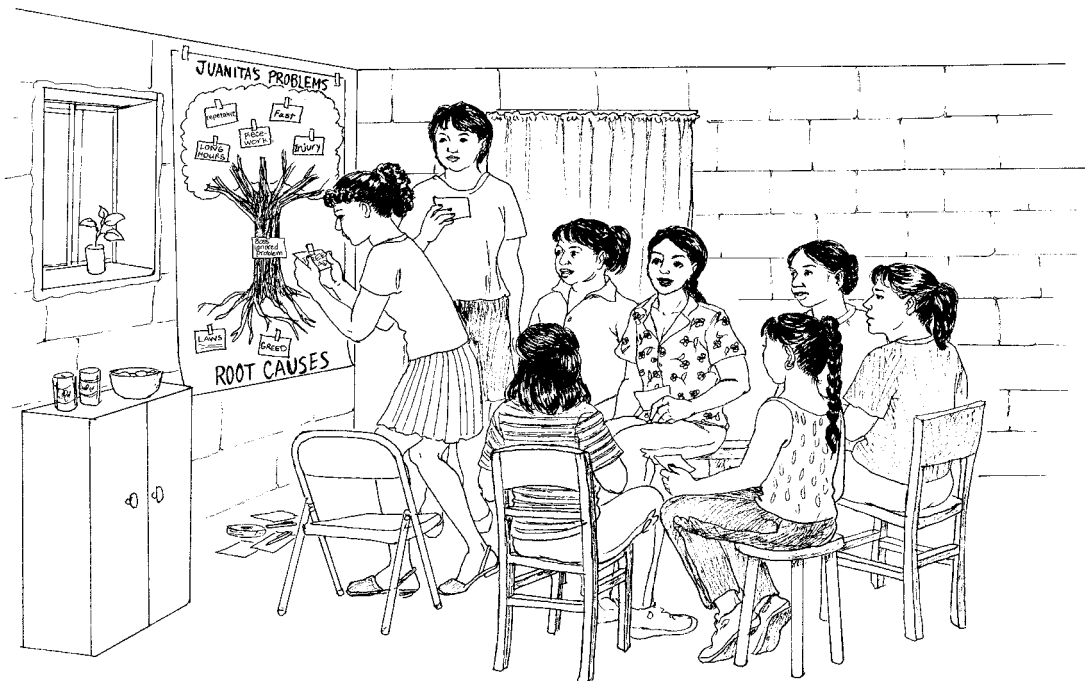
- **Why do Juanita’s hands hurt so much?**
Her job was designed so she could sew pieces of a garment as fast as possible. She had to bend and turn her hands constantly and do the same tasks hundreds of times a day.
- **But why was the work designed like this?**
The boss set up the factory as quickly and cheaply as possible. He did not think about how workers’ hands and bodies could be protected from injury. The boss paid Juanita based on how many shirts she sewed, not how many hours she worked. So Juanita worked as fast as she could for long hours to make quota and earn a little more money.
- **But why was her pay based on how many shirts she made and not how many hours she worked?**
The boss wanted her to produce more shirts in less time, so he would earn more money. The boss is competing with factories in other countries that pay workers the same way.
- **Why did Juanita stay at this job if it caused so much pain?**
It was the only job she could get. She has no other training or skills. Almost all the jobs for women with little schooling are in factories and they all treat workers the same.
- **But why is this the best work Juanita can get?**
Her family was poor and her parents did not think girls need to go to school. The factories hire women like Juanita who need the work and won’t complain because they don’t want to lose their jobs.
- **But why does the boss get away with overworking and underpaying workers?**
He can fire anyone who questions him because the government does not enforce labor laws and the workers do not have the power to stop him. There are many workers waiting to take Juanita’s job. EPZ workers in other countries face the same conditions.
- **But why are there not better jobs for poor people like Juanita?**
Many poor countries are trying to attract foreign companies to build factories and create jobs for poor people like Juanita. The government spends money to build EPZs and cuts taxes businesses pay. To pay for this, the government must cut the budget for education, job training, and other social programs that could create a better job for Juanita. No government agency checks to make sure the EPZ factories create decent jobs, healthy workers, or wealthy communities.

Analyze the root causes

Asking "But why?" helped the women see the root causes of Juanita's problem and can help them choose solutions. As they talked as a group and kept asking "But why?", they thought of more causes than when they first heard Juanita's story. When workers talk about all the causes of a problem, they can find more ways to solve the problem and prevent it from happening again. A group of workers can talk about which causes are the most important, which causes they can change, and who might be their allies. Different

workers will ask different questions and come up with different answers. The questions and answers for your situation will come from your own conditions.

Grouping the answers to "But why?" makes it easier to see the root causes for Juanita's problem. The workers discussing Juanita's problem came up with 3 groups of causes: "work conditions", "social causes", and "political and economic causes."

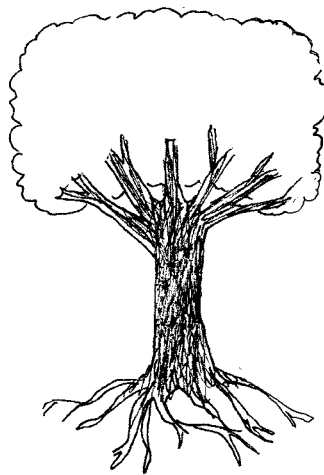


You can create other groups of causes to fit your situation.

Work conditions are the physical conditions of the work site or the community. Dangerous work conditions can cause many health problems. Dangerous work conditions include poisonous chemicals, frayed electrical wires, unsafe drinking water, and lack of healthy foods.

Some dangerous work conditions in Juanita's story are:

- machines
- long hours
- repetitive
- fast
- piecework



Social causes of health problems for workers are attitudes, customs, and behaviors that deny workers' rights and dignity. These include harassment, discrimination, and disrespect. Women workers are especially affected by social customs that expect them to be obedient and quiet.

Some social causes in Juanita's story are:

- women not respected
- no school for girls
- boss ignored problem
- second shift

Political and economic causes of health problems for workers are actions by those who own and control money, land, resources, and political power in the city, region, or country. Political and economic causes include labor laws and policies that allow bosses to pay low wages for long work hours, fire workers who do not make quota, and prohibit unions. They also include local governments that are too poor to provide services like running water in every home and national policies that force small farmers to go to the city to earn money.

Some political and economic causes in Juanita's story are:

- no other jobs
- poor countries compete
- "free trade" not fair trade
- laws not enforced
- greed
- people need work

Discussing the root causes makes it easier to talk about ways to prevent another worker from having the same problems as Juanita. The group can then begin to plan how to make changes by deciding which problem or root cause they want to solve first. The next chapter focuses on how workers can organize themselves and their allies to demand healthier jobs and communities.