

Observe the Work: Study Conditions Before Judging Actions

Todd Jerome Jenkins | v1.0 | Reviewed October 9, 2026 | Discussion + field checks

Why this matters

Work depends on tools, instructions, access, timing and help. A useful observation connects what happened with those conditions. Observe safely, ask about the work at a suitable pause and verify an improvement.

Objective: Record a factual work observation, check its context with the crew and identify evidence needed to verify a useful improvement.

Key hazards or failure points

Distracting a critical step; standing in the exposure area; labels replacing facts; judging an unseen part of the job; workers staging an unsafe demonstration; findings recorded without follow-through.

Practical controls

- Agree the observation's purpose, task boundary, safe position and timing. Review relevant hazards and stop arrangements. Do not interrupt a critical action for questions or ask workers to repeat a hazardous event.
- Observe the task and available support together. Record the sequence, conditions and actual control use. Separate what you saw from what you inferred; capture helpful practices as well as difficulties.
- At a safe pause, ask workers what influenced the step and check your description with them. Assign any improvement through the approved process, with an owner and a way to check its effect.

Verify It in the Field

Before observing, compare the viewing position and timing with the work's access and protection requirements. Confirm who can call a pause. If safe observation is unavailable, use records or arrange another authorized method.

Select one factual note and ask the worker to explain its context. Compare the relevant instruction, available resource and observed condition. Record corrections and unknowns; a short visit cannot establish everything that happens across shifts.

For an approved improvement, identify its governing criterion and safe verification method. Have the designated person record the actual result and time, then ask affected workers whether it resolved the difficulty or introduced another one. Hold work relying on unverified protection.

Stop and reassess

Use the site's safe response when an observation reveals uncontrolled exposure or missing protection. Pause observation if it distracts the task, crosses a boundary or turns into accusation. Preserve factual findings and obtain the required correction and recheck before affected work resumes.

Ask the crew

1. What did we observe, and what are we assuming?
2. Which condition made this step easier or harder?
3. What evidence will show that the improvement works?

Use the task plan and required specialist decisions before exposure.

Sources: DOE-HDBK-1028-2009, Vol. 2, pp. 73-74; OSHA Worker Participation and Hazard Prevention and Control.

Free next step: [JHA/JSA planning & field-verification worksheet](#)

Expanded guidance and separate forms: toddjeromejenkins.com/toolbox-talks/work-observation-conditions-before-judgment

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