The Safety Series - Advocate for Safe Work Practices at Your Brokerage

[00:00:00] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Half of real estate brokerages don't have written safety policies and procedures, and those that do can't always ensure that their agents are following the guidelines. So, who's reminding you and your colleagues how you can work safely? Your office could use a safety advocate. And maybe it should be you.

You're listening to Drive with NAR, the Safety Series. Powered by Realtor Magazine, in partnership with the Realtor Safety Program, hear harrowing stories from real estate pros who have faced danger in the field and expert advice on how to work safely. Get more real estate safety tips at nar.realtor/safety.

This episode is sponsored by ForeWarn. I'm Tracey Hawkins, and any agent or broker can play a powerful role at their company by being a voice that supports a culture of safety. I want to encourage you to do it at your brokerage, and I know my guests do too. Let me bring them in. Dean DeTonnencourt is the broker owner of HomeSmart Professionals Real Estate in Rhode Island.

Welcome, Dean.

[00:01:06] **DEAN:** Thank you so much for having me.

[00:01:07] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** And Chris Garrett is an agent with Weikert Realtors, the Andrews Group in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. Chris is also a safety instructor and serves as a 2024 first vice president of Tennessee Realtors. He is the vice chair of the NAR Realtor Safety Advisory Committee, and he also happens to be the subject matter, a subject matter expert in the original Safety Matters course, which was created in 2015.

Hi, Chris.

[00:01:36] **CHRIS:** Glad to be with you guys.

[00:01:37] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Before we're going to talk a little bit about safety culture, but I want to talk about advocacy. What does advocacy mean for both of you all? As you know, NAR has designated May as Advocacy Month. This is the time we're going to celebrate being an advocate. And here we're talking about safety.

I want to know what does being a safety advocate mean to each of you before we talk a little bit about how it shows and its culture. We'll start with you, Chris.

[00:02:04] **CHRIS:** You know, I see advocacy really as just shining a light. We know that something needs to be addressed, but a lot of times we go about our daily business and people just don't understand that they could be in a situation that could be a hazard for them.

So, once we know that there are dangers out there as instructors, as brokers, as owners of companies, I think it's our job just to, a lot of times just create awareness and sometimes that's really all people need is not to, to frighten them, but just create an awareness. Where when they go about their day, they're paying attention to things that they wouldn't normally pay attention to that could keep them safe.

[00:02:44] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** And to your point, Chris, when the U S department of labor considers real estate sales and leasing a high risk hazardous occupation, once you know that. You must do something about it. Go ahead, Dean, and tell me what does advocacy look like? What does it mean to you?

[00:02:58] **DEAN:** I can't agree with you more, both of you, but especially when we look at that point of being a high risk industry.

Think about that. Did any of us get into real estate thinking that we were in a high risk industry? And to Chris's point, at the end of the day, being an advocate, it's being the person who's not afraid to have the conversation that really needs to be had. Right? It's being the one to bring it about when others aren't talking about it, to bring things to light, to shed some light on topics that people just either aren't aware of, disregard, or just are afraid to discuss.

You know, at the end of the day, when we look at safety in our industry, you know, it comes in so many formats and so many methodologies of remaining safe, whether it's ourselves or our clients, we have an obligation to ourselves, to our colleagues, and to our clients to make sure that safety is accounted for in all things.

[00:03:52] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** In my mind, it's a fighter. We're fighting for something. And in this industry, I pride myself on being a safety advocate. I am fighting on behalf of not only my sister, who is a real estate agent, but all of the agents that I know. My goal is to keep them safe. We don't operate from fear.

[00:04:10] **CHRIS:** I think being an advocate is so important because it's something you hold dear.

You should tell people about it, like you owe it to them to help them understand what the dangers are. In our industry, you look at a lot of industries that just on their face seem dangerous. A lot of times it's just not understood within our industry that there's a danger to what we do every day. And once you know, there's a way that you can operate that could keep you safer, then you've got to tell people about it. So I think it's more of just saying, Oh, I'm an advocate, but it's like, really almost being like a, a missionary for safety. Right?

[00:04:48] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Excellent point. A great, great way to describe it. I agree. I want to make sure that agents know we're not here to scare you, but simply to say that there are solutions.

You, you can work in a safe manner. I have to lay the groundwork here for this, um, question for Dean regarding brokerages. I met Dean at an event in Washington, D C. We happened to sit at the same table. And Dean does what a lot of brokers or brokerages and owners do. They talked about safety. Yeah, we should do something. We should have a safety program. And it's like, okay. But then he did something that most of them don't do. He followed up and he made it happen. So, Dean, I know there's always conversation about whether or not brokerages, the broker owner or manager is the one responsible for setting the tone for safety. So does it have to be the broker who leads that conversation?

[00:05:40] **DEAN:** Yes. And thanks for that. I enjoyed the conversation. And I especially enjoyed, um, When we pulled through and followed through on that conversation, because we opened it up to the entire state and we had just an incredible audience tuning in. So thank you again for being willing to do that. And to your point, no, I don't think it's just the responsibility of the broker, but all things lead from the top.

So, you know, you set the charge and you set the pace and you, you empower others to carry it out. So I do feel that it's the broker. That needs to lead by example and needs to be able to have those conversations and lead that charge. But I think once you get everyone involved, when we look at our HomeSmart family and the collaboration that we have in business, it has to carry down to the personal aspect.

We call ourselves a business family, right? We all have families we go home to every day. We're a business family and we need to treat each other as such. So we need to collaborate. On business, but we also need to support and protect each other. So whether that is, uh, the buddy system, when you have an open house or you have multiple showings, or you're unsure of yourself in a certain situation, you just have, you know, an instinct, a gut instinct, you, you question something.

One of the greatest books that you introduced me to Tracey was the Gift of Fear by Gavin DeBecker. Is it, and it was incredible because we're all born, all creatures are born with a natural instinct. And we need to trust that instinct. So when we do, we need to be able to rely on our colleagues to be able to support us.

And sometimes we need our colleagues to remind us that we have that instinct and to trust it when it comes along. So I think it's everybody's responsibility together.

[00:07:18] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Excellent point. And Chris, I want to know if you believe it's the broker's responsibility. And I also want you to talk about the agent's perspective and the agent's role in establishing a safe culture in the office.

[00:07:30] **CHRIS:** I've always been a fan of the saying, each one teach one. And I think as a broker, you've got to take on that responsibility regardless, because you are setting the tone for your office, whether it's advocating for, you know, any number of things that we do as a brokerage, you set the tone. But I think, you know, I've always said that the culture of your office is what goes on when you're not there.

That's the true culture. So if you set it up to where your agents feel empowered, that if they see someone operating in a manner that's unsafe, that they'll reach out and say, Hey, you know, there's a way you can do this. It's really going to put you in a much better position because of what I've found.

And especially in teaching the course is. Many times when you operate in a safe manner, the things that you do to keep you safe also make you more professional. You're setting up appointments, you know, ahead of time, you're meeting them in a public place. You're doing buyer intakes and seller intakes in the right manner.

You're not running out. So you, you create a more professional business. You actually stand to make more money as an agent because you're not wasting time on maybe non qualified buyers or so forth by not following the proper procedures that, that also in turn keep you safe. So I think it's just a culture within your office that you, it just becomes the way you do business.

[00:08:53] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** And you hit upon an excellent point. Professionalism. Every time we talk about safety, it seems like that topic comes up that real estate agents need to hold themselves to a professional standard, like any other profession, you know, doctors and lawyers, they all have procedures in place if you're going to visit them.

And to your point, real estate agents must as well. And in this day and age, we're constantly talking about agents showing their value. And I believe that when they show the professionalism that they want to meet in advance, it's not only for the agent's safety, but it's for the consumer's safety. And it gives you an opportunity to educate them.

So tell me. Do you think it's the broker's responsibility, Chris, to create that safety culture in the office?

[00:09:33] **CHRIS:** Absolutely. I think it has to start with the broker. Because I found many times when a broker doesn't see the value in something, you could talk to the agent separately. Rarely will you see the agent's, you know, that don't follow suit with the broker because they're really looking at that broker for their training, for setting, you know, setting the tone for that office.

So the, the ownership, the brokerage, the way you train, it just has to become ingrained. You know, it almost doesn't really have to be a separate thing that you train within your office because if you train properly on a buyer intake culture it's gonna include the safety measures that help you be more professional and be a safe buyer agent same thing on the sell side that that's a side that really doesn't get looked at as much because oftentimes the agents assume that they're you know going to someone's house that lives there, but that's not always the case. Even, you know, in, in teaching the class, I've heard stories of people being invited into people's homes. It was actually their home and they were attacked while they were at the home. So just being aware and just ingraining that in all the training that you do, I think that's so important. So I do think it has to start with a broker, but it really has to, the agents have to be empowered to follow suit and really own that.

[00:10:50] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** And you both hit the nail on the head when you said it starts from the top. So, safety culture starts with the leadership. Dean, you have over 300 agents. And I know you mentioned something about you would prefer that your agents cancel an appointment rather than take a chance. Talk to us a little bit about that mindset, where that comes from, that you're putting their safety over the profit part of it.

[00:11:14] **DEAN:** Yes, absolutely. No one showing, no one inspection, no one client, no one fee is worth the loss of your life, right? And we always have to look at it trickle down as it relates from business as well as from safety. So no one situation should put you in harm's way. It's just not worth that. We make a living meeting strangers in strange places. That's what we do. So whether it's a vacant house, whether it's their own personal home, that's what we do. We have to be mindful of that. I would much rather see someone cancel a showing and lose out on that potential opportunity than to risk their own personal safety. And I will always support someone when they cancel that.

And I'm also, I always offer to be available for that buddy system. If nobody else is available at the end of the day, we need to make sure That when we have that concern, that we follow that gut instinct.

[00:12:09] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** We'd like to thank Forewarn for sponsoring this episode. The Forewarn app provides instant identity verification and risk assessment of prospects with as little as an incoming phone number, enabling safer engagements and smarter interactions.

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I always say that the job description of a real estate agent is that you meet complete strangers at empty houses. You sit in empty houses and wait for strangers to walk in. You walk up to the door of a stranger's house, ring the doorbell, go inside and close and lock the door behind you.

But there are ways to Chris's point of removing some of those dangers. Now, Dean, you also talked about as a resource that you offer self defense courses for your agents and that you also enforce the buddy system. And you also talk right now about being a buddy and you talk about safety month. Could you expand for your fellow broker owners What you do to enforce that safety culture in the office, the actionable way,

[00:13:16] **DEAN:** I want to lead with we can't work from a base of fear, right? Chris mentioned working from a base of safety, and that is so important, but we can't lead with fear, but we need to be mindful. of that fear and listen to that instinct. So whether it's enforcing the buddy system, we use a collaboration group where our agents are communicating with each other.

When there's a situation, people are offering to assist and or cover and or attend to buddy up. We have done safety courses, personal safety courses where we bring in professionals to help with some of the basic maneuvers that are needed, right? You know, we're not going to do a full karate black belts, you know, system, but the basic maneuvers of just protecting yourself in the sense of as simple as not going into the basement ahead of the consumer, you know, find yourself, put yourself in a situation where you're in jeopardy.

Being aware of your surroundings, I'm sure Chris can speak to some of the safety issues of being mindful of the scenarios that we put ourselves in that we just don't even think about it as simple as pulling into the driveway and making sure you're parking such that you're not the one that's first in the driveway and blocked into the driveway and can't get out.

So we're always talking about that as a company where we're relying on the professionals. We've had self defense experts come in. We've had safety officers come in to speak in that regard. And above all else, if I'm speaking to fellow brokers, I think it's important that we realize that, you know, we don't just wait till safety month to talk about safety, right?

Safety month is the month that we talk about it the most, but safety month really is 12 months out of the year.

[00:14:54] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** And Chris and I talked about that September safety month and as safety instructors, that's our busy month. And to your point, Dean, it should be year round. Now, Chris, you come to this from a different perspective.

You have a law enforcement background and you also have a martial arts background. I know you practice jujitsu. Talk to us a little bit about what that looks like, how that informs your decisions when you're talking to brokers and owners and associations about getting some kind of safety training.

[00:15:23] **CHRIS GARRETT:** Sure.

You know, we live in a state where it's easy to carry a gun in our state. It's easy to be armed. And our state's easy to get a license in our state. You can carry open if you want to in our state, you know, going back, you've also gifted me the Gift of Fear. I've been reading it. And one of the things that really stood out to me is he talked about the fact that it was never usually a big movement.

It was never a big thing. That was the sign that someone was going to commit a crime or harm you. It was usually a micro aggression. It was something very small that you had to pick up on. And what I found is there's a lot of people that they go out and they get a gun permit. They've got this gun with them.

They rarely ever shoot it. They rarely ever go to the range. They're not very comfortable with it. And what happens before you get to the gun, because many times it's underneath clothing, it's underneath, so just having an awareness, that's what really made me think about, you know, going into jujitsu to really create a comfort level with myself.

Does if someone's had attacks, we had a joke in jujitsu that said, Hey, you attacked me wrong because you know, we weren't ready, they would attack you. You didn't have the defense ready, you know, so it's easy when you're in a controlled environment, but when someone comes out of nowhere, because usually you don't know ahead of time that, you know, there's not a flag that says, Hey, I'm a killer.

You know, they're going to come in the most unassuming cloak sometimes. So you have someone that's purporting to be a buyer, purporting to be a seller, and they're waiting for an opportunity that you're going to be an easy target. So I have found in all of the stories in the research, almost every time they were looking for a soft target, an easy target.

They were looking to go in, commit a crime, to take control, either to rob or, you know, fulfill some, you know, sexual fantasy or whatever it was, but it was always to be in control. And the moment that control shifts. It really gives you a much better chance to survive an attack like that. So I think that's where, you know, when you look at self defense and it's just you having options, because many times if someone gets attacked, if they've not trained, and I mean on a regular basis, cause it's, it's a perishable skill because you can go for a while without training and you're rusty.

Right. So if you don't train at all, a lot of times you just freeze up. over, they freeze up. So there's really just no options for that person to defend themselves. So being put into situation, I think that's the most important thing about some type of martial arts is being put into a situation where you know what it's like to be struck.

You know what it's like for someone to grab ahold of you and to try to choke you and you're able to In controlled environments, get out of that situation gives you a lot more comfort level when something does happen. And at least you have a much better chance of defending yourself.

[00:18:15] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** That's an excellent point.

And I appreciate your insight, the perspective that you have, that you share with us. The 2023 Member Safety Residential Report the NAR puts out every year said that 81 percent of the agents have not attended any safety training. Now, Dean, you're an advocate for your agents. There's no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Not only do you worry about your agents in your vicinity, but one thing that you did that I admire is that you said, As an organization on the national level, we need to do something. So you made the steps, you took the steps to make safety culture available for everyone in the organization. So speaking of being an advocate, what is your message for your fellow broker owners and managers to advocate for the safety of their agents?

[00:19:04] **DEAN:** Before something happens, well, you know, and that would have been the message. Let's talk about the issues. Let's talk about the situation before it becomes an issue. We all know the stories and the scenarios of the unfortunate circumstances that have happened to fellow colleagues in the industry. And it seems as though.

We talk about those examples or something happens and it becomes the topic of the moment. It's like all of a sudden it's all hands on deck. Oh my gosh, we need to do something about this. We need to have safety courses. We need to do this. But we're doing it because we heard of an unfortunate circumstance that already happened.

You know, how great would it be if we're actually talking about it and preventing those circumstances from happening in the first place? And I know it's hard to do that on a global stage every moment, but at the end of the day, if we're not at least talking about it and not waiting until September to handle the topic, You know, circumstances like that happen at any time.

So let's get ahead of it. If there's any messages, get ahead of it, talk about it, make sure that you're proactive and make sure I think bigger than that. Make sure your agents know that it's important to you. You know, people don't care what you know, until they know that you care, right. And you absolutely need to make sure that you're talking about the topic.

[00:20:16] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Wonderful. And before we wrap up, I'm going to ask you all to end with action items. So. And I'm going to ask Dean to tell your broker managers and fellow real estate franchisers what they need to do going forward. And then I'll ask Chris as well. But before we do that, Chris, the National Association of Realtors has made safety education a core standard.

That means all associations and boards must offer some kind of safety education. As you know, that doesn't trickle down to the broker, manager, owner level, or even to make agents show up. What is your advice for incorporating that core standard into business going forward?

[00:20:57] **CHRIS:** What I've tried to do as an instructor is offer the one hour version to a lot of the brokers and owners and try to encourage them to then come and get the full class when they can do it as a CE, because a lot of times if you, if you offer a CE class, well, you're really encouraged agents to, to attend because they want that CE. But I have found it's one class I've sat through many, many classes.

I rarely have someone on their phone the whole time. They're usually so engaged because once they start hearing the things that other people have experienced, the stories, I'll tell you, there's probably the most important things are the stories that you hear of how people maybe narrowly avoided a major disaster or an attack or how they were attacked.

And just hearing that story really is more important than anything that someone could learn on a chart or a graph. So I think getting that down to cause what I find is it is a lot of times if there aren't brokers in the room, when I'm teaching the class, you'll ask the agents. Do you have a safety protocol? Is that part of your policies and procedures? They're like, no, we don't, we don't have anything. And so now they're tasked with having to go back and convince their broker that they need that. Right. So it's really the, the opposite of how brokers and owners should be viewing safety. They should be bringing that down.

So I think we can do a better job.

[00:22:15] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Sounds like both of you answered the question. So you have given marching orders to your fellow real estate agents, as well as your fellow brokers, managers, and franchise owners. What I want to say as we wrap up here is that I am an advocate. This is what I do.

This is all that I do. And I had a conversation last week where someone said, Tracey, we'd love to have safety training, but we can't do it because we're doing training about the commission lawsuit. And I have to say, timeout, safety is important. Without the agent, there is no conversation. So my goal is to make sure that everyone understands that safety can be a part of building your business as well as keeping your agents safe.

And I want to thank both of you. I couldn't have had two better guests to come today to talk about advocacy in the real estate world as it relates to safety. Thank you both so much and everybody, stay safe. Thank you for joining us on Drive with NAR, the Safety Series. New episodes of the Drive with NAR podcast drop twice a month at magazine.realtor/drive or wherever you get your podcasts. NAR does not endorse any product and does not take a stance on any specific safety tool. Members are encouraged to use only those safety tools in which they're properly trained. Find more safety resources at nar.realtor/safety.