

INVESTIGATING ON-THE-JOB INJURIES

A fundamental component of any accident prevention program is the investigation of the injury by a representative of management. The adage that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it, is especially true in safety. Each accident, no matter how minor, is an opportunity to learn how to prevent future accidents.

Accidents are usually the result of conditions or actions that the supervisors and employees are often in the best position to control. An accident is simply an unplanned event that interrupts operations and results in loss of time, property damage, or bodily injury. They usually arise from one of four areas:

- **Equipment:** Buildings, tools, carts, machinery, vehicles, etc.
- **Material:** Solvents, cleaning agents and anything else that might be used as part of the service or job.
- **People:** Includes those persons that operate equipment, use cleaning materials, interact with the public, etc.
- **Environment:** Includes temperature, ventilation, noise, insects, or other factors that affect the surrounding work area.

What accidents should include the fact-finding process?

Many accidents involve little or no property damage/physical injury. This type of accident is called a “near miss” accident. It has been found that a “near miss” may often precede an accident producing physical injuries and/or property damage. For this reason, all significant “near misses” and accidents that result in employee injury should have the fact-finding implemented. There are valuable lessons to be learned from the review of “near misses,” and about the prevention of a more serious accident.

Accident Causes

It is important to define the two types of accident causes that must be considered:

- **Basic causes** - The basic causes can be thought of as the symptoms of the accident. These are the unsafe act(s) and/or unsafe condition(s). Example: operating a grinder without wearing safety glasses, or oil on the floor
- **Primary causes** - The primary causes are the reasons why the unsafe act(s) or condition(s) existed. Example: Lack of instruction on why safety glasses should be worn while grinding, or why oil was leaking on the floor. These causes place the focus where it belongs--the management system. By strengthening the management system, accident symptoms or basic causes will be prevented which will break the accident chain. This area of the fact-finding process deserves a great deal of thought and consideration

General Guidelines for Fact Finding

- Begin the investigation as soon as possible; provide first aid or seek medical assistance; eliminate hazards.
- Note the time of arrival and condition of the weather (if relevant to the event).
- A preliminary survey of the situation should be taken. This is to be done with composure and without haste.

- Take names and addresses of all witnesses and immediate verbal statements.
- Avoid preconceived theories. These are the investigator's deadliest enemy because they will cloud his/her reasoning, deaden his/her perception, obscure the facts, and distort the individual's judgment.
- Never alter the position of, or even touch, any object before it is sketched, photographed, or properly described in the report.
- Note the time of accident and/or injury (hour, day, month, and year).
- Note the specific place where the accident occurred, in detail.
- Note the name of the injured person(s) involved, including occupation and department.
- State how the action took place (chronological order is most helpful here).
- The *Who, What, When, Why, Where* and *How* formula is most helpful to follow each time a different person is introduced in the action.
- A subsequent interview of the witnesses should be conducted at this time.

Interviewing

Getting information from co-workers who may have observed the accident is critical to understanding how the incident occurred.

Some important considerations when interviewing:

- Conduct interviews as soon as practical
- Discuss the purpose of the investigation (**fact-finding, not fault-finding**)
- Establish rapport (put the person at ease, talk briefly about common interest, be calm)
- Ask one question at a time (count to 10 between questions - this allows time for complete answers)
- Avoid leading questions or the implied answer (ex., "why did you fail...," "obviously you...")
- Keep questions as simple as possible
- Don't ridicule stupidity, poor judgment, etc. Do the best you can to allow the person being interviewed to "save face"
- Allow the individual to present his/her version in its entirety without interruption, if possible. Keep your thoughts to yourself
- Ask questions to clarify facts or fill in any gaps
- The interviewer should relate his/her understanding of the accident back to the individual
- End the interview on a positive note; thank the employee for their assistance with the assurance that they are helping to prevent future accidents

The interview should be conducted at the accident site, if possible, unless it interferes with privacy or is causing a distraction to co-workers.

Corrective Actions

Failure to identify corrective actions more specific than "told employee to be more careful" is a common failing among supervisor reports. The supervisor, along with the immediate staff, should be able to suggest specific actions, procedures, or policy changes that can prevent similar incidents in the future. Examples of corrective actions are:

- Institute formal training program
- Give personal re-instruction
- Institute proper job instructional program
- Improve employee screening program
- Temporarily or permanently reassign person(s)
- Institute a job hazard analysis program
- Order or revise job analyses on specific tasks
- Institute or improve self-inspection program
- Institute pre-use checkout of equipment
- Establish or devise indoctrination for new or transferred employees

For further assistance on this matter or other safety and risk control issues, contact your risk management consultant or Jim Rhoads, NJPHA-JIF safety consultant (610-397-5061).

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