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Are You Promoting a Safe & Healthy Workplace? by Leslie Lord

All incidents, whether a near miss or an actual injury-related event, should be investigated. Near miss reporting and investigation allows you to identify and control hazards before they cause more serious incidents. Accident/incident investigations are tools for uncovering hazards that were either missed earlier or have managed to slip out of the controls planned for them.

Conducting an investigation is useful when done with the aim of discovering every contributing factor to the accident/incident. The goal is to "foolproof" the condition and/or activity and prevent future occurrences. The objective is to identify root causes, not to set blame.

WHO SHOULD INVESTIGATE? The investigator for incidents is usually the supervisor in charge of the involved area and/or activity. The responsible safety office of the company should participate in the investigation or review the findings and recommendations of the person investigating the accident. Many companies use a team or a subcommittee, made up of employees and management, to investigate incidents involving serious injury or extensive property damage.

An accident investigation is an advantageous way to get employees involved in the process because they can provide additional insight. Employee involvement also provides an opportunity to educate on potential hazards, and in their eyes, will lend credibility to the results of the investigation and the importance of safety.

INVESTIGATION PROCEDURES AND REPORTS

Six key questions should be answered: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?

Fact should be distinguished from opinion, and both should be presented carefully and clearly. The report should include thorough interviews with everyone who has any knowledge of the incident. A good investigation is likely to reveal several contributing factors and will probably result in the recommendation of several preventive actions.

NATIONAL SAFETY COUNCIL DEFINITIONS

- **Accident:** An undesired event that results in personal injury or property damage.
- **Incident:** An unplanned, undesired event that adversely affects completion of a task.
- **Near Miss:** An incident where no property was damaged and no personal injury sustained, but where, given a slight shift in time or position, damage and/or injury easily could have occurred.

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- Nearly 50 American workers are injured every minute of the 40-hour workweek.
 - Nearly one third of all serious occupational injuries and illnesses stem from overexertion or repetitive motion. These disabling and expensive injuries cost the economy as much as \$20 billion in direct costs and billions more in indirect costs.

Avoid the trap of placing sole blame on the injured employee. Even if injured workers openly blame themselves for making a mistake, the accident investigator must follow the prescribed procedures and not be satisfied that all contributing causes have been identified. The error made by the employee may not even be the most important contributing cause. The employee who has not followed prescribed procedures may have been encouraged to do so, either directly or indirectly, by a supervisor or a production quota.

The prescribed procedures may not be practical, or even safe, in the eyes of the employees. Sometimes, where elaborate and difficult procedures are required, engineering redesign may be a better answer. In such cases, management error—not employee error—may be the most important contributing cause.

Individuals who investigate incidents should describe all the identified causes carefully and clearly. When reviewing accident investigation reports, the responsible safety officer should be on the lookout for catch phrases like, “Employee did not plan job properly.” This phrase places the blame on one individual, and is not conducive to identifying every possible cause, prevention and control.

IMPLICATIONS OF ACCIDENT INVESTIGATIONS

Recommended preventive actions should make it very difficult, if not impossible, for the incident to recur. The investigative report should list all of the ways to “foolproof” the condition or activity.

Remember the primary purpose of an accident investigation is to prevent future occurrences. Beyond this immediate purpose, the information obtained through the investigation should be used to update and revise the inventory of hazards as well as the program for hazard prevention and control.

Note: No one should investigate incidents without appropriate accident investigation training. Future issues of SBC Magazine will give updates on the [WTCA Safety Program](#), which will provide valuable information about safety and accident investigation training.

[SBC HOME PAGE](#)

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