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**MONTHLY NEWSLETTER**

**Are you reliving the same accidents?**

Manufacturers work very hard to prevent accidents in the workplace. They continuously inspect operations, always looking for hazards and unsafe conditions. They also evaluate the work process to determine if there are tasks or behaviors that could serve as a catalyst for an accident and lead to a serious injury. Accidents are never a good thing, but repeat accidents are an even greater source of frustration for safety conscience operations. Even more wearisome is when a single employee has multiple accidents in a short period of time.



Work related accidents don't just result in medical treatment for the injured worker and an increase in insurance premium. Accidents can adversely affect production, damage equipment and create anxiety among employees about their welfare. They wonder if they'll be injured next. Additionally, there is the exposure to fines and penalties from regulatory agencies such as OSHA. Clearly, limiting injuries in the workplace needs to be a focus of every manufacturing operation.

Employers can take steps to break what might be a cycle of accidents. Consider the following as practical action you can take to keep your operation running safely. Manufacturers should:

- ◆ **Set accident goals** - Make it clear to everyone in the organization that eliminating repeat accidents is a priority.
- ◆ **Identify the steps toward this goal** - Steps should include accident investigation, root cause identification and additional safety training.
- ◆ **Increase supervision** - Ramp up supervisory oversight, look at the behavior of employees as they approach their work.
- ◆ **Communicate priorities clearly** - Make employees aware of the problem, concerns, goals and steps to reach the goal. Make doubly sure they know the chief concern is their safety.
- ◆ **Promote a safety culture** - Encourage employees to participate in safety programs and planning. Encourage them to share their observations and ideas.
- ◆ **Recognize and reinforce safe performance, Celebrate goals achieved!!!** - Use incentives and rewards to recognize and improve safety performance.
- ◆ **Emphasize hazard detection** - Encourage hazard reporting, including unsafe acts.

## Are your employees work ready?

Safety minded employers are always sensitive to hazards and unsafe conditions in the workplace. They routinely inspect tools and vehicles to determine if a facet of their operation could result in a work related injury to their employees or injury/damage to the public. What they often overlook is the potential for injury and loss that their employees might bring into the workplace. Employers need to be aware of situations and actually look for the possibility of employees that are coming to work, but may not be "work ready".

Each day you take the employee as he or she is. If they hurt their back the evening before moving furniture in their new home, but come to work and after a couple of hours of packaging your product for shipment and say their back hurts and they want to report a work related injury, the injury they claim will most likely be compensable. Work readiness is really another form of workplace inspection. Looking at employees as they enter the building at the beginning of the day may reveal behavior that suggests they could be bringing an injury to work or may be prone to injuring themselves further at work. In other words, making an existing condition worse.

Certainly employees that come to work in a cast or on crutches will raise a red flag with any supervisor as to whether or not that employee is capable of working safely. But, beyond such obvious indicators employers should also look for signs such as limping or guarding. By guarding I mean protecting a part of their body where they may already be injured or in pain. It could also mean fatigue behavior, such as drowsiness or not seeming to be alert. Putting an employee in a vehicle or asking them to use machinery when they are fatigued can be a recipe for disaster.

These observations have particular importance after a weekend or perhaps following an employee's vacation. For example, an employee entering the operation on a Monday morning who is limping, guarding their arm or even wearing a bandage might suggest that they are not ready to complete their job tasks without considerable risk of injury or further injury to themselves or the people and employees around them.

The motivations for conducting work readiness observation are twofold. First and foremost, you are protecting your employees. Safety should be a priority and being work ready helps avoid work-related injuries. No one wants to be injured on the job and no employer wants their employees injured while working for them. And, employers need to protect their bottom line. Workers' compensation injuries are extremely costly, with lost time claims averaging about \$85,000 in benefit costs alone.

So what you do when an employee enters your facility? What happens next? Ideally the employer/supervisor should be aware, be observant and inquire. The key is what do you see, not what you think. It's appropriate to ask questions, but be mindful of observing the three Cs, **continually communicate concern**. Before you ask questions, let the employee first know what you see. I know this seems like common sense, but sometimes we want to share what we think before offering what we see. Remember the three Cs and if you see something that looks problematic, ask what happened and ask if they've seen a doctor? You need to be careful about probing too much about medical treatment and medical conditions. There are HIPAA privacy laws that affect this area, but it is not unreasonable to ask the employee if they have received medical treatment for what appears to be injury behavior you observe.

If you believe an employee is not work ready, advise Human Resources and ask for direction. Your company may have a written policy for treating these circumstances, but regardless all employers have a duty to provide a safe workplace for their employees and not to place them in a heightened state of risk for injury to themselves or others. Remember, you take the employee each day as they are and should he/she sustain further injury as a result of you putting them on the job with an injury, you as the employer may be responsible for treating the total injury not just that portion related to their workplace injury.



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When in doubt, it is advisable to request that the employee provide medical documentation supporting that they are work ready, if you have a question about that based on an observation you've made. Finally, remember to **document** what you objectively observe as opposed to what you think.

You may not be able to observe every employee every day, but never observing them at the start of the workday will increase the odds that an already injured employee will be further injured, and at your expense. Your employees are at least as important as the tools they work with. Conduct work readiness observations as a method of hazard inspection with the same care you would use when inspecting tools, machinery or vehicles. Protect your most valuable asset, your employees.

*continued from "Are you reliving the same accidents?"*

Almost as important as what you do sometimes is what you don't do. Don't:

- ◆ **Send mixed messages** - Everyone needs to know that the organization takes each accident seriously and that preventing the same kind of incident from happening again is a top priority.
- ◆ **Use discipline without also offering help** - If safety rules are ignored or broken, disciplinary action may be required. But even those instances, make sure that there is a practice in place to help poor safety performers improve.
- ◆ **Lecture or offer weak pep talks** - You may be a captivating speaker on some topics, but employees seldom respond well to being lectured about safety. Listening to a safety lecture is a passive process for your employees and you want them actively engaged their own safety performance and well being
- ◆ **Blame** - Blame won't solve the problem. Instead, focus on *why* the employee made the mistake and *how* to keep them from repeat that mistake or similar mistakes that could lead to an accident.
- ◆ **Assume the worst** - Expect the best and that's probably what you'll get. After you trained or re-trained you should expect employees with poor safety performance histories to improve. If you don't expect improvement, why re-train?
- ◆ **Give empty pep talks** - Actions speak louder than words, so back up encouraging words by making real safety improvements and offers of assistance and support.
- ◆ **Focus only on injury types** - Companies often make a tactical mistake and focus on avoiding injuries, such as back injuries. Instead, focus on the cause of injuries. Back injuries arise out of many causes, but improper lifting can cause, back, shoulder, neck and knee injuries.

Manufacturers need to have an objective of continuous safety improvement. Just because you haven't had an accident for a period of time doesn't mean less attention should be paid to safety or enhancing the safety program you already have in place. Make sure your safety improvements identify:

- ◆ Those jobs or tasks that have the highest risk of accidents.
- ◆ Employees who experience repeat accidents and examine their work behaviors.
- ◆ PAR (Physical Aptitude Risks) Is the employee physically capable of meeting the demands of the job?
- ◆ Contributing loss cause factors such as work spaces, workload, tasks, procedures, equipment and the shortcomings of their personal protective equipment (PPE).
- ◆ Any issues in the company's safety culture such as employee participation in safety training, management's commitment to safety, and the process of accident reporting, investigation, and correction.

Repeat accidents can be controlled and even stopped entirely with a concerted effort on the part of management and employees to eliminate unsafe acts, eradicate hazardous conditions, and continually emphasize safety as a business priority.



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