Safety Cop

Don't Count On Luck to Duck the 'Big One'

Whoever said, "A miss is as good as a mile," never studied industrial safety. Near misses—accidents that almost happen—foretell a future accident. They are valuable for two reasons. First, they let unsafe workers learn from their own experiences and avoid real injury. Second, examining them is a powerful management tool for identifying unsafe acts and conditions. Studying near misses to discover the underlying causes can help prevent costly and disabling injuries, damage to machinery, materials and buildings, and increased insurance costs.

Learning from near misses also capitalizes on incidents that have *already* occurred and cannot be undone. Even though no one likes to admit mistakes, workers should be made to realize that bruised egos heal quicker than broken limbs.

What Are The Odds?

In the 1930's, H. W. Heinrich showed that, on average, out of every 330 incidents 300 would be minor, 29 would result in injuries and one would cause serious injury or death. This is illustrated as the Heinrich Triangle. Workers and supervisors alike must recognize that minor variables like timing, physical position, or the actions of others, influence the chance of any one incident being a near-miss or a serious accident. The key to preventing the 30 "real" accidents is to prevent the 300 minor incidents from ever occurring. That means investigating why the accidents almost happened.

Learning from near misses works for those who embrace the behavioral approach to accident prevention (eliminating unsafe acts) as well as those who believe that hazardous conditions are the major cause of accidents. This is true because examining near misses uncovers both unsafe acts and unsafe conditions, any of which could cause an accident or increase the likelihood that any particular accident will be "the big one."

Don't Leave It to Chance

Safety is enhanced when everyone puts more than luck on their side by correcting the conditions that can cause an accident. "Conditions" also mean the workplace culture and worker mindset, not just housekeeping or machine guarding. This means that supervisors and workers can't just breathe a sigh of relief because they stopped themselves from falling, or happened to notice that a machine wasn't properly locked out before performing routine maintenance. They have to learn the lesson, and make necessary changes in procedures, attitudes or physical conditions to avoid repeating the same incident—with possibly serious or fatal results next time.

Recognize This Worker?

How many times will workers trip over a broken floor tile and mutter that some one should do something about it? These employees, who will not alert their super visor about the unsafe condition, will likely not evaluate their own poor safety behavior — especially if they have always gotten away without injury. But the Heinrich Triangle is silently watching them fool themselves, and one day the odds are that they will experience the incident or accident that was always waiting to happen.

So don't wait for an "I told you so!" accident to happen. Work on your safety culture to support the reporting of near misses, without focusing blame. If a hazardous condition exists, fix it now. If an unsafe act almost caused an injury, report it and learn from it.