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Near Misses: Organizational Get-Out-of-Jail-Free Cards

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The get-out-of-jail-free card is the perceived ability to circumvent a certain penalty or consequence with minimal or no damages incurred. They range from the avoidance of a traffic citation to getting away with arriving late to a meeting. Such seemingly insignificant near-misses are welcomed and much appreciated in all aspects of life. The key factor is that sometimes we get away with more than just normal day-to-day occurrences, such as traffic citations, and we find ourselves getting away with potentially life-threatening work practices or hazardous conditions. However, when we get away with doing something dangerous with no harm or accident, a near-miss has most likely occurred.

Recognizing & Handling Near-Misses

Employees of every company throughout all industries are exposed to workplace-related accidents and incidents of varying degrees of severity depending on the nature of work involved. Consequently, accident prevention and hazard identification are continuously brought to the forefront of every SH&E professional's agenda. Various measures are taken to reduce or eliminate the most common and most serious of accidents, such as engineering controls, administrative controls, safe work practices, training and PPE. Unfortunately, the near-miss incident still occurs on a regular basis, but near-misses can become part of an effective hazard control process if they are recognized, investigated, documented and communicated to all related personnel.

Oftentimes, a near-miss will occur when an individual is completely unaware of a work hazard while the near-miss occurs as a surprise. Other times, workers know what the hazards are but choose to work dangerously under the assumption that they will continue to get away with it. This worker mentality and approach to jobsite hazards puts employees in the position to run out of near-misses and to experience direct hits.

Near-misses usually fall into the category of events that will eventually turn into accidents, incidents, workers' compensation claims or fatalities. In many cases, it is not if but when these types of outcomes will occur. Due to organizational and cultural norms, many companies classify near-misses as unfortunate events where luck or happenstance saved the company or individual from a costly incident. Others see the near-miss as something to be ashamed of and to conceal from management at all costs to avoid disciplinary recourse. When the near-miss is

forgotten and unaddressed by a company, it will someday assume responsibility for an avoidable incident or at least negligent and willful violations.

Reacting to Near-Misses

How we receive the news of near-misses and react to them will dictate how our employees will respond and correct certain hazardous behaviors and conditions. Reacting to near-misses with anger or frustration will only exacerbate the condition and cause workers to withdrawal and resort to a system of concealing near-misses. Ignoring the report of a near-miss and acting in denial will cause workers to continue to work in an unsafe manner.

SH&E professionals must graciously consider the near-miss to be a friendly reminder, a wake-up call and an opportunity to reposition oneself on a safety policy. The time to strategically plan safety policies is not after a near-miss has occurred but through proactive operational analysis and anticipation. Furthermore, near-misses can be an excellent way to refocus efforts on what is working, not working and what is really happening on jobsites. Using these experiences to our advantage will provide a realistic picture of what we can do to improve operations so the same near-miss will not reoccur or that a more serious incident will not occur. SH&E professionals must reflect on how they react to near-misses and what follow-up procedures would best benefit their workforces.

Suggestions

Suggestions for near-miss occurrences include:

- Communicate to employees the importance of near-miss reporting and that it can be an anonymous report if employees prefer not to volunteer their identity or level of involvement;
- Follow up to ensure that personnel or property were not affected and if they were, follow normal procedures to reconcile the damage;
- Brief employees directly related on what happened and how it can be avoided;
- Brief employees indirectly related so the same near-miss does not reoccur on other jobsites;
- Revisit any safety plans or policies to include the near-miss condition that may be missing from the company handbook or normal training regimen;
- Thank, recognize or reward employees for their willingness to volunteer critical information that will most likely protect the company in the future;
- Make near-miss reports known throughout the company as proactive management will send a message of sincere care and concern to employees, which builds enthusiasm and loyalty.

Conclusion

In conclusion, SH&E professionals at all levels of the organization can take an active role in ensuring that near-misses are taken seriously. Furthermore, through management commitment and communication, near-misses can be minimized and more employees can be protected through proactive approaches to near-misses.

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