Safety Alert

We're Serious About Safety

Accident Investigation

When an incident occurs at your facility it could result in illnesses, serious injuries, reduced morale, lost production, OSHA fines, reduction in profit and worst of all, loss of life.

The cost of an incident can be detrimental to a company when combining the direct and indirect costs of the claim. This is why it is important to investigate all worksite close calls, illnesses, injuries, and fatalities. Investigating these incidents provides employers and workers the opportunity to identify hazards in their operations and shortcomings in their safety and health programs. This also gives employers and workers the opportunity to identify and implement the corrective actions necessary to prevent future incidents.

An incident investigation involves a systematic approach for identifying the cause of the accident and providing corrective actions. The most important part of a good incident investigation program is the prevention of the same type of injury. Incident investigations that focus on identifying and correcting root causes, not on finding fault or blame, also improve workplace morale and increase productivity, by demonstrating an employer's commitment to a safe and healthful workplace.

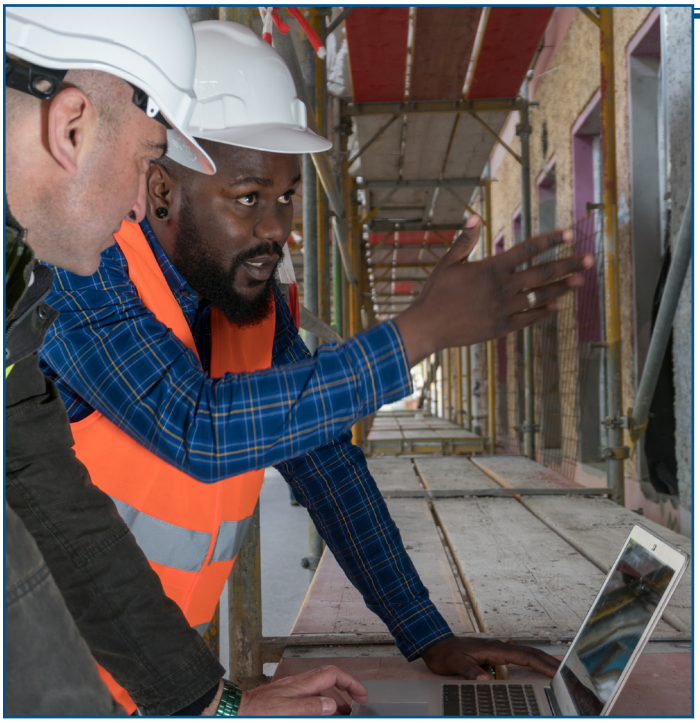
Companies with a strong safety culture will have employees driving the investigating and reporting process on their own. When employees have ownership of the company's processes, procedures, systems and culture they understand the importance of identifying near miss accidents, properly reporting incidents and hazards to appropriate supervision and fully participating in incident investigation. These employees understand the importance of developing appropriate corrective measures to reduce / prevent the chance of future injuries.

As a reminder, near misses and incident-only events need to be investigated too. Small incidents or illnesses have a tendency to lead to more serious illnesses and injuries if not appropriately addressed.

During an incident investigation, an employer must determine which factors contributed to the incident. OSHA encourages employers to go beyond the minimum investigation required and conduct a root cause analysis. A root cause analysis allows an employer to discover the underlying or systemic, rather than the generalized or immediate, causes of an incident. Correcting only an immediate cause may eliminate a symptom of a problem, but not the problem itself.

A robust process safety program, which includes root cause analysis, can also result in more effective control of hazards, improved process reliability, increased revenues, decreased production costs, lower maintenance costs, and lower insurance premiums.

To be most effective, incident investigations should be led by supervisors but should also include experienced operators, maintenance staff, employees working in the area when the incident occurred and any other employees who have knowledge of the operations. It is important for employees to work together on the investigation, since each bring different perspectives.



When conducting an incident investigation, the team must look beyond the immediate causes of an incident. It is far too easy, and often misleading, to conclude that carelessness or failure to follow a procedure alone was the cause of an incident. To do so fails to discover the underlying or root causes of the incident, and therefore fails to identify the systemic changes and measures needed to prevent future incidents.

When a shortcoming is identified, it is important to ask why it existed and why it was not previously addressed. For example:

- If a procedure or safety rule was not followed, why was the procedure or rule not followed?
- Did production pressures play a role, and, if so, why were production pressures permitted to jeopardize safety?
- Was the procedure out-of-date or safety training inadequate? If so, why had the problem not been previously identified, or, if it had been identified, why had it not been addressed?

These examples illustrate that it is essential to discover and correct all the factors contributing to an incident, which nearly always involve equipment, procedural, training, and other safety and health program deficiencies.

Interviews

- Prepare a list of witnesses and other individuals to be interviewed.
- When possible, do not allow more than 24 hours to elapse before conducting interviews.
- Conduct interviews in a private setting to avoid interruptions and distractions.

- Prepare a list of questions in advance of any interview. Use questions that require narrative answers. Avoid questions that suggest an expected answer, for example, “Isn’t it true that the injured employee was running?” Also avoid questions that can be answered with either a “yes” or “no” answer.
- **Questions should be structured using six key elements:**
  - **Who** - questions identify all parties involved.
  - **What** - questions identify pertinent actions, events, and physical objects.
  - **Where** - questions locate participants, witnesses, and key objects involved in the accident.
  - **When** - questions determine the time of the accident and establish relationships between pairs of activities or events.
  - **How** - questions provide information on the interaction and relationships among participants, equipment, and the events leading up to, during, and after the accident.
  - **Why** - questions determine unsafe acts or hazardous conditions.

Addressing underlying or root causes is necessary to truly understand why an incident occurred, to develop truly effective corrective actions, and to minimize or eliminate serious consequences from similar future incidents.

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