

The Benefits of Workplace Incident Investigations

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Workplace incidents do happen and their costs can be substantial. When an incident occurs, what is your organization's reaction? Conducting incident investigations can identify the causes of the incident and will help to prevent such incidents from reoccurring within the workplace.

Incident investigations are often poorly understood in the workplace. As a result, they can lead to finger-pointing and meritless blaming. Productive workplace investigations identify the causal factors of an incident and make recommendations for corrective action by determining what happened, how it happened, and why it happened. Effective investigations focusing on the "Root Cause" of the incident can benefit an organization in the following ways:

- Determining the exact cause of the incident;
- Determining the likelihood of recurrence;
- Enabling the development of risk management controls to prevent future incidents; and
- Demonstrating organizational concern, bolster employee confidence and improve public relations.

Incidents that result in injury/illness, damage to a vehicle, property damage, or injury to a third party or their property should be investigated, as well as environmental spills/contamination, theft, workplace violence, vandalism, et cetera. Many organizations broaden their approach to incident investigation to include all "Near Miss" incidents, those incidents that do not result in actual or observable injury or damage to an employee or third party.

Some helpful tips when faced with a workplace incident that requires an investigation include the following:

- Secure the area where the incident occurred to prevent future injuries or property damage;
- Visit the incident site before the evidence is disturbed;
- Document observations of the condition of the incident site;
- Photograph or video tape the incident scene from all angles;
- Identify and conduct general interviews of eye witnesses and other individuals who could provide pertinent information;
- Review other sources of information, such as design specifications, drawings, policies/procedures, maintenance records, employee training records, et cetera; and
- Notify law enforcement (If warranted), insurance carriers, and other relevant officials associated with your organization.

Many organizations utilize a risk manager and/or safety director to conduct incident investigations. Often times an organization's safety committee can be a vital asset in incident investigations and review. Both can equally be beneficial as long as investigations are fair and equitable treatment is provided to all sides involved in the incident. For incident investigations to be an effective tool for an organization, an internal incident report should be prepared. The following can be useful in developing information to be included in such a report:

- Background Information – where and when the incident occurred, who and what were involved, and who witnessed the incident;
- Account of the Incident (What Happened?) – sequence of events, extent of damage, accident type, source of energy/material (if necessary);
- Analysis of the Incident – direct causes, indirect causes (unsafe acts and conditions), basic causes (policies/procedures, personal/workplace factors, et cetera);
- Recommendations to prevent recurrence for immediate and long-range action to remedy causes.

Incident reports should be maintained on file permanently. Completing a report and filing it away with little or no action will do nothing to prevent the incident from occurring again. The report should be provided to senior management or others who can do something about the recommendations submitted.

Workplace incidents cost financially and often times affect individuals mentally and physically. Incident investigations can help prevent unnecessary and preventable incidents within the workplace; however, it is a decision an organization must make to ensure such investigations occur to reap the benefits.