

Near Misses--Correcting Close Calls Before They Become Accidents

A "near miss" is an accident waiting to happen. It is something that almost happened or even did happen, but just didn't result in an injury this time around. For example:

- An employee trips over an extension cord that lies across the floor but avoids a fall by grabbing the corner of a desk.
- An outward opening door nearly hits a worker, who jumps back just in time.
- Instead of using a ladder, an employee puts a box on top of a drum but once up loses his balance and falls to the ground. He's a little shaken up, but not hurt.

When things like this happen, most employees (and often their supervisors, too) feel relieved that nobody was hurt and simply get back to work. But that's a big mistake.

When employees narrowly avoid accidents and injuries, neither they nor management should ever shrug them off. Someone--the employee who had the near miss or someone else--is very likely to be injured eventually by that very same hazard.

Near misses are golden training opportunities. Following any near miss, call a safety meeting and talk about what did happen, what could have happened, and how to make sure that it doesn't happen. Seize the moment and you might just prevent the imminent accident. For example, say a worker slips on a slick surface and almost--but not quite--falls. Have a safety meeting on housekeeping and talk about each employee's responsibility for correcting a hazard, when possible, or reporting them when workers can't fix them. You can use near misses as training opportunities in all different safety and health areas.

Watch out for the underreporting of near misses. One of the biggest problems with near misses is that employees tend not to report them. To counteract this dangerous tendency, train your workers to treat near misses just like accidents. In other words, they should take them seriously and report them immediately. Point out that the sooner a safety problem is brought to management's attention, the sooner you can find out what's going on and take action to prevent someone from getting hurt the next time the same thing happens. Also remind employees that:

- You're not looking to blame anyone when you ask them to report near misses; you just want to get to the root of the problem so that you can prevent future accidents and injuries.
- You want them to report a near miss even if they've removed the hazard or corrected the problem themselves. Many near misses are just the tip of the iceberg--signs of larger safety problems that need attention, such as poor housekeeping, the need for an ongoing maintenance plan, poor work area layout, problematic work procedures, or insufficient training in safe work practices. You need to know about every little safety-related problem.

Why It Matters ...

- Most accidents can be predicted by near misses.
- According to the National Safety Council, 75 percent of all accidents are preceded by one or more near misses.
- The difference between a near miss and a serious injury might be a fraction of an inch or a split second of time.
- Near misses are a red flag--a warning that something is very wrong and requires immediate attention.

When we share the responsibility for safety in the workplace, everyone wins!!