ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION

The informed manager is aware that there is a very real dividend to be earned in safety - not only in the money saved by avoiding costly accidents, but also in the improved employee morale produced by setting up safety programs. The safety-oriented organization is one that cares about its employees' welfare, and that caring pays off in business success.

Obviously, all workplace accidents can't be eliminated. As long as there are people, accidents will occur. But much can and should be done to train people to work safely and provide safe working conditions. Since we have already stated some accidents will occur, this section deals with what should be done after an accident happens.

We all know an accident when we see or have one. For the record, let's define accident:

An accident is any unintended occurrence that causes or could have caused personal injury or material damage; i.e., falling on the floor, a hand touching a hot surface, an employee dropping a box of materials that he is carrying, a cart being used to transport materials striking a suddenly opened door. (This also includes the so-called "near-miss" - those incidents in which luck was the sole reason no one was hurt and nothing was damaged.)

Four other terms should also be clarified:

(1) An injury is the result of an accident - a cut foot, a broken arm, a damaged eye. It is not the accident itself.

(2) The primary cause is the condition or act that caused the accident - a pool of liquid spilled on the floor, a hot pan sitting on a stove or counter, a piece of broken glass in with some soiled laundry, etc.

(3) Secondary causes are other acts or conditions that contributed to the accident. These would include the reason the spill on the floor had not been cleaned up; why a hot pan had been left sitting on the counter, where it should not be; why the broken glass was placed in the laundry container, rather than a trash receptacle. Often you may find it difficult to separate the primary from the secondary cause. Don't let this hinder an accident investigation; simply choose one as primary, and list the others as secondary causes. The important thing is to detect and correct all of them.

(4) Other causes are conditions that could cause similar accidents but had no effect on the particular accident being investigated.

Why investigate?

Simply to prevent an accident in the future. Nearly every accident offers you the possibility of preventing another accident sometime in the future. In other words, it is to your advantage to examine each accident as soon as possible, find the cause and correct the situation. On the average, 330 accidents of the same type will produce no injury in 300 incidents, minor injury in 29 incidents, and one major injury. These statistics, however, fail to show which particular instance will produce the serious injury. Therefore, you have to treat each occurrence as if it had produced a major injury or material damage. ***There is only one way to find out the real cause of accidents - investigation.***

Now, let's be practical for a moment. You, the supervisor, have to work within practical limits. Even in the best of circumstances, your situation is not going to be ideal. You still have to maintain schedules, account for absenteeism or sickness and maintain or increase quality of service. No manager can eliminate all job hazards and still get the work done within reasonable time frames and budget constraints. Employee welfare (and Cal/OSHA), however, require the elimination of all unnecessary job hazards. There are many practical things that you can do to eliminate dangers associated with employees' jobs.

Injury prevention and accident prevention are often confused. For example, when the employees are required to wear safety shoes or lenses, the possibility of injury is reduced, but not the possibility of an accident. Nevertheless, when it is not possible to eliminate the accident potential, we must concentrate on preventing the injury. In some situations a simple solution may be available where both the injury and the accident are preventable, but most situations don't limit themselves to a simple solution. Your first consideration should be to prevent the accident. If this is not possible then you must take action to prevent the injury.

The next question is, who investigates? There are no simple rules dealing with how a safety program must be set up. Each organization must staff and equip for its own needs. Regardless of size, however, the supervisor is directly responsible for all operations within his/her unit - including safety. This person is often best equipped to investigate the accident in his/her area because he/she knows those working for him/her, their behavior patterns, attitude, jobs and the hazards involved. This doesn't mean that he/she must stand alone with this responsibility. Management shares with the supervisor the responsibility for employees safety. Other sources of assistance such as outside consultants are also available in many cases when needed.

When is the proper time to investigate an accident? As soon as possible. The accident investigation should begin the moment that you hear that an accident has occurred. Usually physical evidence starts to disappear almost at once. Clean-up crews will move things away and erase important details. Other people arrive at the scene and soon many of your clues are gone.

Witnesses may leave the scene. While impractical in many instances, photographs of the accident can save you much time in gathering accurate information. The use of a Polaroid camera to take a simple black and white photograph of the accident scene should be considered. Certainly, some things will have to be postponed. Questioning the victim who is still in shock, for example. But the critical thing is to start investigating while all the facts are present.

For a successful accident investigation, obviously you have to know what caused the accident. You have to know what sort of things to look for in your area and be able to recognize this evidence when you see it. Generally, there are two groups or types of accident causes:

(1) Unsafe conditions (physical causes)

(2) Unsafe acts (personal causes). You may have to perform an intensive search before you find the real cause of an accident, regardless of the type.

The investigator of an accident has two sources of information, objects and people. Objects are fairly reliable if they are present, for they aren't affected by tricks of memory or prejudice. The key to inspecting objects is knowing what to look for. For instance, a cart spills a load of material. Did the cart strike an object on the floor, a hole in the floor? Also was the cart in good condition with no defective parts, or was the cart so overloaded that it was unstable? A "yes" answer to any of these questions would help to narrow your investigation. People, on the other hand, can be more difficult to handle because your approach to them will often determine the amount of information that you are going to receive. You must be both impartial and impersonal. Trying to fix blame or find someone to "blame it on" (or giving this impression) will accomplish nothing. Concentrate on the facts, but any scrap of information may turn out to be important. Therefore, collect all you can including tips and rumors. You'll have time later to sort and evaluate your material.

The information that you receive from the people at the scene may or may not be accurate. A variety of factors can color the facts. Some common ones are:

(1) Did they actually see the entire accident take place or were they attracted by the noise and excitement?

(2) What are the attitudes of the people involved? Do they dislike the organization or their supervisor? (Our feelings do affect the way we see things.)

(3) Is the person you're talking to trying to avoid being at fault? Or, on the other hand, does he or she have an ax to grind and is merely taking this opportunity to do so?

Your basic question when interviewing people is, "Why?" For example, "Why do we do it this way?" "Why are these items stored here?" However, in using this approach, be ready to point out that the reason you're asking these questions simply is to find out the facts so that a similar accident won't occur.

You can't expect accurate information from people if they feel threatened. Frequently, the answer you will receive to "Why?" will be, "because we have always done it that way." This answer often points out the real cause of an accident; no one has thought of the safety aspect before, or they have been unwilling to change even for the sake of safety. Either way, you have made an important discovery.

Finally, you have completed your investigation. But your job is not yet quite done. Even the most comprehensive, accurate investigation can be a useless exercise if you don't complete an accident investigation report. The report allows you to follow-up and take corrective action. To be effective, it should be simple, precise, and informative. It should indicate logical preventive action with a minimum of lost time and motion. The facts to be covered are:

(1) The accident. What happened? What could have happened?

(2) What was the primary cause? What were the secondary causes? Were there other possible causes?

(3) Preventive action. What has been done or should be done to prevent a recurrence?

SUMMARY: This section has been designed to assist you in preventing future accidents while properly investigating those accidents that do occur. What you see and record, what action you take or recommend, influences not only the progress of your organization, but more important, the safety of men and women who make up your staff. Begin your investigations by asking? "Why?" and continue asking until you know all the facts. Answering that question will save a lot more than future accidents; it will save injuries, property damage, and money.