

Week of November 8, 2010 – Report all Accidents and Incidents

Mac's face was turning as red as a beet. "Come on, Ethyl! Why are you making such a big deal out of this? No one was hurt, nothing was damaged, at least, nothing noticeable. No harm, no foul, right?!"

"Absolutely wrong, Mac." Ethyl Mercaptan, Senior Safety Rep for Property Management, Inc., recognized a volatile situation when she saw one. What she said next and *HOW* she said it would undoubtedly determine whether Mac would erupt like Mount Vesuvius or be able to return to the land reason. Mac just hit a pole while backing his forklift. It was true, there was no sign of damage and, even better, no one was injured. But contact was made and this was, indeed, an incident. It couldn't even be categorized as a "near miss."

"Mac, I know you're the expert. That's why I always call you up and ask for your opinion when it comes to operating heavy equipment. But you're human; we're all human, and as humans, we make mistakes all the time. Believe it or not, Mac, part of my job is to observe and isolate conditions where our humanness represents a potential point of failure in the work we perform."

The glaze of red was slowly fading from Mac's eyes. She knew she could continue talking. Mac misjudged the distance between a pole and the rear of his forklift. As a matter of fact, he couldn't even see the specific location of the pole where contact was made because the rear of the forklift was too large to observe the immediate area-of-concern. So Mac estimated what he thought was a safe distance, while getting as close to the pole as possible. Ethyl heard from other crew members that Mac was good at poker; today, unfortunately, lady luck was no friend. Not only did he not give himself a decent margin of safety, but, after discussing the incident with Mac, it turns out that this one time, he made a turn sooner than he normally did. Usually, during this project, Mac would swing his forklift to the left after he past the pole. But for some reason, this time he turned earlier which placed the forklift in the direct path of the pole.

The reasoning behind Mac's decisions, so far were unclear. But that was what Ethyl was here to do: Complete the investigation and understand why the incident occurred and what can be done to prevent similar occurrences. After all, while no one was hurt in this case, the next time, something worse could happen. So if we can understand why this incident occurred; an incident that resulted in no damage costs or injury, for only the time it takes to understand the event's "Who's, Why's, Where's, When's and How's," we can prevent a similar event and create an operation that can run consistent, safe and effective. The dividends reaped would be ample pay back for the time spent for conducting the investigation.

In the meantime, a few other things needed to be done. Two of which are: examine the reporting process and get Mac tested per the company's drug and alcohol policy.

Ethyl knew from experience that incident reporting was not always a sure thing. Many times, employees involved in incidents were reluctant to report because of the fear of strict disciplinary policies. While there is a natural tendency to cover things up, it is the responsibility for each organization to make everyone feel comfortable that if an honest mistake was made and a malicious intent was not the motivation, informing their organization is the right thing to do. Trust and respect needs to be mutually applied.

A workplace injury can be an unsettling experience. So if we can learn from our mistakes before an unfortunate event occurs, then we have truly provided a valuable service. And the first step, after we secure the scene, is to report the incident through the proper chain-of-command. This involves notifying your supervisor, who in turn, notifies the project manager. Once that occurs, it is the project managers' responsibility to ensure all other people that need to be notified are contacted, such as the customer and the safety and health professional assigned to the project. This starts the ball rolling; ensuring that the work is properly analyzed and that work may continue in a safe, controlled manner, without any further incident. This chain-of-command may be modified when a serious event occurs and someone needs immediate medical attention. Once medical attention is established, the pre-determined notification process should begin.

Within recent years, many companies have established mandatory drug and alcohol programs. These are initiated whenever a workplace incident occurs; especially when the incident involves a vehicle or piece of heavy equipment. The purpose is to determine whether the operator was impaired, thus being a root cause for poor judgment resulting in the incident or even near-miss. TPMC has a mandatory drug and alcohol program. It can be found in the Corporate Employee Handbook.

While many companies have employee assistance programs, offering help to those employees with dependency problems, once a workplace incident has occurred, it is generally considered to be too late. So similar to avoiding a workplace injury/illness, when a dependency problem is identified, we need to report it through the proper chain-of-command; especially if you are the one who is dependent on drugs (prescription or recreational) or alcohol. This is one more measure to ensure a proactive safety culture and to control you and/or your fellow-workers from getting injured.

Safety Note: Clocks have now been changed back Standard Time. Just a reminder that it is time to change out batteries in your homes' smoke detectors.

Anyone who has the power to make you believe absurdities has the power to make you commit injustices.

Voltaire (aka François-Marie Arouet) French historian and philosopher (influenced important thinkers of both the American and French Revolutions).

Courtesy of Robert Brounstein, Corporate Director Safety and Health with TerranearPMC