TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of March 3, 2014 – At-Risk Behavior

At-Risk Behavior…what exactly is that?! There are many definitions but one that seems to sum it up best is: *Behavioral choice that increases risk where risk is not recognized, or is mistakenly believed to be justified*. Take, as an example; driving and texting. The driver does not believe he/she is going to get into an accident, but because, the driver's attention is not 100% focused on the road – watching the surrounding conditions, being observant of other cars, this person has just increased the chances of getting into an unfortunate road incident. This is not to say that anyone who texts and drives will get into an accident; but they have increased the risk of this happening. As the first part of the definition states, At-Risk Behavior is a "behavior choice," meaning a decision was made to reduce one's ability to control a situation. Every time an at-risk behavior occurs, someone is exposed to potential injury. The more often this behavior occurs and the more people performing it, the greater the exposure.

If we shift from a typical non-work scenario to a typical work task performed in the field – lifting an object, we can see how At-Risk behaviors are frequently performed. Lifting a load greater than 40 pounds might not be very risky if done once, but multiply this risk by numerous employees making several lifts per day and you gain a different perspective. By performing a risk numerous times in a given day, the risk of a back sprain/strain or dropping a load increases.

Duration also contributes to risk exposure. The longer one carries a 40-pound load, the greater the exposure. In another example, the longer one resists using PPE, the greater the exposure. Conversely, one brief instance of donning certain PPE, such as a hard hat or wearing a vehicle safety belt reduces risk exposure for the entire duration of usage.

What's the probability that a behavior will result in an injury? Once again, consider the act of lifting. By counting people and daily opportunities to lift per person, you can get a good estimate of exposure. But how probable is it that lifting a load greater than 40 pounds will cause a back injury or any severity? Many factors come into play – the age and physical strength of the lifter and various behavioral aspects of the lift. When lifters hold the load close and bend their knees, the probability of a back injury is greatly reduced.

Going back to the At-Risk definition, the last part mentions that such actions are "believed to be justified." In other words, it is typical for At-Risk Behavior to occur because there is a perception a risk is so small that the likelihood of occurrence is too minimal to even consider. Why would people feel underwhelmed or unimpressed by risks or safety hazards at work? After all, the high degree of hazard exposure caused by a large work force and many hours of work makes it quite probable someone will eventually be injured on the job. Of course, the use of appropriate protective clothing or equipment can eliminate the possibility of injury in many cases. But many people don't appreciate the value of using personal protective equipment or following safe operating procedures. Why? It has been explained by subject-matter experts that one's perception of risk is generally much lower than the actual risk.

The more information and experience we have regarding a risk, the less risk we perceive. Each of us may recall how attentive we were when we were first worked on a task that was considered

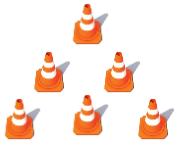
to be high-risk, like walking on an elevated surface. After continuously working at this task it is typical to develop a reduced perception of risk as the situation became more familiar. As a result, an adjustment in behavior occurs. Other tasks that we typically start out with a high degree of concern for our safety are: working on electrical circuits, working near heavy equipment and excavations or working in radiological areas.

Experts have brought out that it is not an unfortunate consequence, by itself, that will make individuals more cognizant of risk, but rather, it is the consequences that we know WILL HAPPEN that will motivate. Therefore, if there is a perception that an accident is certain to happen, and happen immediately AND will result in a significant negative consequence, chances are an individual will take appropriate precautions. On the other hand, if the consequences are uncertain (injury or discipline do not occur every time), or if there is a delay (loss of hearing happens over time so the consequence of not wearing ear plugs is delayed), or if they are insignificant (minimum inhalation exposure, or fall is only one foot), then there is a high probability that At-Risk behaviors will occur.

In the field of Safety, a model, known as the Heinrich Triangle helps us to visualize the relationship between a simple At-Risk behavior with no apparent consequences and a fatality. In the simplest terms, for every fatality, there are 30 serious injuries, 300 minor cases (OSHA recordable cases), followed by 3000 near-misses and 300,000 At-Risk Behaviors. As Heinrich's theory is a model that suggests (and today is widely accepted with high credibility) that all these consequence categories have a common thread; that is, the initial behavior that can manifest itself as merely an irresponsible behavior or a observed near miss or even an injury or worse (catastrophic event). It is only through other outside influences, such as someone walking in an area at a specific time, or another car driving at a particular speed or direction and specific time, that an unnoticeable At-Risk behavior can become a regrettable action.

At-Risk behaviors may include bypassing safety components on machinery or eliminating a safety step in the production process that slows down the operator. Forgoing fall protection or not following a procedure that is designed to conduct a task in a safe manner; are other At-Risk behaviors. Just because someone does not wear a body harness when working at an elevated height does not mean he/she will fall to his/her death – it merely increases the risk of such a catastrophe happening.

An organization can create the most sound safety and health program, but if the employees do not work within the processes established by these plans, At-Risk behaviors will ultimately trump any and all S&H controls; be they engineering controls, best work practices, administrative controls or PPE.



We often enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought

John Fitzgerald Kennedy