

# *TerranearPMC Safety Share*

## **Week of March 5, 2012 – Accident Investigations**

The term "accident" is typically defined as an unplanned event that results in injury or property damage. On the other hand, when an unexpected event occurs that did not cause injury or damage but had the potential to cause such an event, it is referred to as an incident. Many times we have heard this type of scenario referred to as a "near miss." However, if one thinks about it, "near-miss" actually means there was an actual hit as we are describing an occurrence where physical contact was almost avoided and thus contact was made! Nevertheless, this term has become accepted within the English lexicon as meaning precisely the opposite for the term for which it is truly describing.

Many times we have heard others describe an event as an accident to imply that the event was related to fate or chance. However, through diligent investigation a root cause can be derived, which, in turn, can result in the understanding that the actual undesirable event was predictable based on the steps leading up to the accident. Therefore, the accident could have been prevented if the right actions were taken and so the event was not one of fate or chance.

When accidents or undesired events are investigated, the emphasis should be concentrated on finding the root cause of the accident. The purpose is to find facts that can lead to actions - *not to find fault*. Always look for deeper causes, as once the underlying motive or root cause has been properly identified, an effective control can be instituted and thereby, prevent similar types of occurrences from happening in the future.

Reasons to investigate a workplace accident include:

- to find out the cause of accidents and to prevent similar accidents in the future (*most important*)
- to fulfill any legal requirements
- to determine the cost of an accident
- to determine compliance with applicable safety regulations
- to process workers' compensation claims

For the same reasons, incidents (involving no injury or property damage) should still be investigated. Many times, incidents go unnoticed as there is no specific event that catches the attention of persons in the area. It is important to recognize near-misses as these events give us the opportunity to prevent an accident without the cost of anyone getting hurt or having damage to property, materials or equipment.

Thousands of accidents occur throughout the United States every day. Unfortunately, we have seen that it is generally the failure of people to behave or react as expected that have caused most of our unwanted occurrences; whether at work or at home. Such is the typical scenario of people falling from ladders while placing Christmas decorations on the outside of their homes because they used the wrong ladder or used a ladder incorrectly.

While there is no OSHA regulation that requires employers to conduct accident investigations, they have become requirements in many corporate safety and health programs as they have proven to be very valuable tools to help us determine how and why *failures* occur. Ideally, an investigation would be conducted by someone experienced in accident causation, experienced in investigative techniques, fully knowledgeable of the work processes, procedures, persons, and industrial relations as well as the environment of a particular situation. To ensure such subject matter expertise, a team with the appropriate personnel needs to be assembled. This typically includes a safety and health professional, supervisor (field team lead, project manager, etc.), labor representative (if a trade union is involved with the process), the involved employee(s), as well as a subject matter expert for the specific operation (such as an electrician or a crane operator).

The advantage of having the supervisor involved is that this person can usually take immediate remedial action. Conversely, there is a counter argument as the supervisor may be tempted to gloss over some factual material which he/she may be defensive as this person may feel a personal stake that an unwanted event occurred during his/her watch (remember, an investigation is *NEVER* to find blame on an individual – only to understand why the event occurred). This situation should not arise if the accident is investigated by a team of people, and if the worker representative(s) and the members review all accident investigation reports thoroughly.

A difficulty that has bothered many investigators is the idea that one does not want to lay blame. However, when a thorough worksite accident investigation reveals that some person or persons among management, supervisor, and the workers were apparently at fault, then this fact should be pointed out. The intention here is to remedy the situation, not to discipline an individual.

Reluctance to point out human error which contributed to an accident will not only downgrade the quality of the investigation, it will also allow future accidents to happen from similar causes because they have not been properly addressed.

An investigator who believes that accidents are caused by unsafe conditions will likely try to uncover conditions as causes. On the other hand, one who believes they are caused by unsafe acts will attempt to find the human errors that are causes. Therefore, it is necessary to examine some underlying factors in a chain of events that ends in an accident.

The important point is that even in the most seemingly straightforward accidents, **seldom, if ever, is there only a single cause**. For example, an investigation which concludes that an accident was due to worker carelessness, and goes no further, fails to seek answers to several important questions such as:

- Was the worker distracted? If yes, why was the worker distracted?
- Was a safe work procedure being followed? If not, why not?
- Were safety devices in order? If not, why not?
- Was the worker trained? If not, why not?

An inquiry that answers these and related questions will probably reveal conditions that are more open to correction than attempts to prevent "carelessness".

**Knowledge is power, but enthusiasm pulls the switch**

Ivern Ball (just some guy that has lots of interesting things to say)