

# *TerranearPMC Safety Share*

## **Week of April 30, 2012- Why we do the things we do**

I opened my computer and immediately went to the internet to catch up on my e-mails and see what's going on in the world. *Google* is my automatic home page and while expecting to see the typical multi-colored alpha logo, a zipper was imbedded into the name. *Google* typically does this when they are honoring the birthday of an individual that somehow made a positive contribution to our society. Clicking on the zipper, numerous hits of Gideon Sunback appeared...the inventor of the zipper! No wonder! This brought to mind an incident I was involved with many years ago when investigating a workplace accident in Los Angeles, California. It took place in a zipper manufacturing plant when an individual, trying to be a team player, got his hand caught in a machine which resulted in the amputation of most of his right hand.

That was a tragedy. It didn't have to happen. A machine that was designed to complete the final stage of producing zippers got jammed. Company policy required that any maintenance on powered equipment needed to be conducted per lockout/tagout procedure. This meant that the equipment needed to be shut down and all energy to the machine placed in the "off" position with locks securing this placement. In addition, keys that controlled the locks needed to be in the possession of those performing maintenance and tags placed on the controls informing other employees that the equipment is locked out for a reason and therefore, no attempt should be made to bypass the on/off controls.

According to the employee, he thought that instituting the lockout/tagout process would have caused too much production down time and that if he could just unclog the machine, it would be up and running in a matter of seconds. He was just trying to be a good employee. For him to reach the area within the machine that was clogged he would have had to open the main hatch and because the equipment was designed with interlocks, the machine would have automatically shut off. He knew he could fix the machine's clog without causing a halt of production. After all, this is what good employees are supposed to do! A smooth, unfaltering operation is the priority.

So the employee decided to try something different. If he could just fix the clog, this particular production line would be back in business and no one would even know what happened. He realized that the only way for him to reach the affected area was to fully extend his entire arm into the machine, thus allowing him to get his hand on a piece of cloth that was trapped and then remove it. Once that was done the automatic feed system would continue and the machine could regain process. For him to get his hand fully extended into the machine, he had to lie down on the floor and place his hand through an opening near the ground, followed by contorting his arm through a maze of twists and turns to finally reach the clog. During the investigation, he said that

as soon he felt the piece of cloth that was caught, he was able to grab it (although he couldn't see it as he was lying on the floor). He stated that as soon as he was able to pull the cloth away, the equipment automatic feed system began. Unfortunately, his hand was right in the area of the point-of-operation, which was designed to remove excess fabric through a very sharp cutting mechanism.

This employee will live his life with tremendous regret. True, workers comp (for which was the reason I was there) will provide some monetary compensation, but nothing will ever replace the loss of his hand. If he knew the results before he performed this task, without a doubt, he would have never started it.

An accident is defined as “an undesired event that results in harm to people, damage to property, or loss to a process.” How many of us would do something if we knew it would result in an accident? Especially when it is known that the end results could be achieved without that risk. But everyday people do exactly that. Many times we do not wish to institute safety into an existing process as it requires creating an additional step – and that means time: extra time and effort for which is generally perceived as unnecessary.

A Pioneer in the field of human behavior, Abraham Maslow, presented the theory known as the “Hierarchy of Human Needs” which describes human motivation. Basically this theory states that as humans, we have certain levels of importance or priorities which need to be fulfilled. The most basic of these needs is that of survival. Next is safety, followed by a sense of belonging (i.e. friendship), then meeting our egotistical desires (achievement, respect of others) and lastly, a person's desire to reach their full potential as a person (referred to as *self-actualization*). This hierarchy of needs is individual perceptions of how we see ourselves and not necessarily a reflection of reality. Based on our likes, dislikes, specific desires and goals, we frequently see things from a flawed, biased perspective. Did the employee who lost his hand really think that he was placing himself at risk? Of course not; most probably, he was motivated by a sense of belonging or even to gain respect from his fellow employees and even management, not even realizing that he was compromising his safety.

Whenever we start a task, it is important that we are able to identify the possible hazards associated with that activity. We need the help of our coworkers and to work together and watch out for one another and speak up when we see something that doesn't look right. Examine our work areas prior to starting our tasks. These are just a few of the things we can do to prevent an undesired event which can result in something for which we may spend a lifetime of regrets.

**“There is nothing so useless as doing efficiently that which should not be done at all.” - Peter Drucker**