

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of June 6, 2011 – Small mishaps can go a long way

Ethyl felt like she was about to be blind folded and sent before a firing squad. As she sat before the Corporate Director of Operations, she made every effort to appear cool, calm and collected. Keeping her composure was very important; that is, if the message she was about to deliver was to have the impact she intended.

Ethyl Mercaptan was assigned to head up safety and health at a construction project where an old warehouse was being used to store the necessary equipment and materials. One week ago a newly hired laborer named Charlie Parker walked into her trailer with his right hand firmly gripping his left elbow.

“Charlie, what happened?”

“Ethyl, I slipped and fell while carrying a few pieces of angle iron across the warehouse. I don’t know how it happened. I was just walking along and within a split second, the floor just seemed like it gave out from under me and I went crashing down.”

Ethyl turned to one of her colleagues, a tall good-natured man named John Gillespie that had an office in the same trailer as Ethyl.

“John, could you take a look at Charlie’s arm while I ask him a few questions? The first aid kit is in my office. Use what you need and give the nurse a call afterwards. I hope that’s OK with you Charlie, yes?”

“Sure Ethyl. No problem.”

Ethyl continued to talk. “And afterwards I’m going to check out the warehouse so I can gather some information as to why Charlie took this tumble.”

Charlie told Ethyl the exact location where he fell and that the incident occurred when nobody else was present. Ethyl left Charlie in the capable hands of John and proceeded to go to the scene of the accident.

As soon as Ethyl reached the location that Charlie described, she was able to see that Charlie didn’t just slip for any reason. She noticed a puddle of oil with the prints of the bottom of working boots – presumably Charlie’s. Since the prints looked like they were made fairly recently, she made the connection between the oil puddle as being the source for Charlie’s

accident. She continued examining the scene while talking to various personnel. She walked around the warehouse looking for answers. After about an hour Ethyl was convinced that she found the source of the oil puddle: a forklift with a leaking crankcase. She examined the daily inspection checklists for the forklift. Not too surprised, she saw that all the checklist items were marked as satisfactory. When she examined the actual forklift, she was able to see that forklifts' crankcase oil reservoir was quite low. She guessed that within a day the reservoir would be completely dry. Once that happened, there would be a potential for serious damage to the forklift, rendering it inoperable. She decided that immediate maintenance was required: So Ethyl red-tagged the unit, thereby removing it from service. Of course, this placed a tremendous burden on warehouse operations which, in turn impacted the construction work - after all, the warehouse was the storage location for the project's equipment and materials.

As it turned out, Charlie just needed a cold press applied to his elbow along with a little TLC by the project nurse and he was ready to go back to work. Yet the fork lift was now out-of-service. If the project was going to continue and stay on schedule, another forklift would have to be brought to the site and this would take days and additional money. The Director of Operations, Art Blakey, was not happy. He reasoned that if Charlie was OK and the maintenance crew could just keep an eye on the crankcase oil reservoir (and fill it up whenever necessary), work could continue without a hitch.

Ethyl needed to explain that through her investigation, it was determined that an expensive piece of equipment could have been permanently damaged – which would have resulted in a very abrupt and inconvenient “stop work” condition...AND by keeping it in service in its current condition, the project was susceptible to another accident – one that might require more than just tender touches from the project nurse. Yes, if this condition continued unchecked, the project would be leaving itself open to having a serious injury. In addition, the fact that the maintenance crew was merely pencil-whipping their daily inspection check lists told another story: one where personnel were not performing their work with a certain diligence for which the project placed great responsibility. Thus the project's commitment to “conduct-of-operations” needed to be re-evaluated. After all, if the oil levels were not being properly checked, what about the back –up alarms, lights or brakes or other safety devices?

What Ethyl was trying to convey was that through a relatively small or insignificant incident, many other things were noted; things that if they were not identified, or left unchecked, could lead to other serious incidents or financial losses – all of which could result in a “stop work” or other costly delays. Through this accident investigation, the project was given the opportunity to be proactive and catch these potential mishaps before they happened. Now it was Ethyl's turn to show the importance of her decision and to communicate that instead of her actions impeding the project, they actually will help the project towards a successful completion.

Everyone is necessarily the hero of his own life story....

John Barth - American novelist and short-story writer