

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of June 1, 2015 – Workplace Distractions

Patty Kakes was listening to music. Ethyl couldn't tell what type of music it was but it was a good bet it wasn't Mozart. Patty was bobbing her head up and down while the guys were mesmerized by the slight back and forth motion of her hips, gently swaying in a somewhat restrained gyration. This would have been acceptable at a night club or a party. However this was a worksite. An open pit was only ten feet away while a water truck was spraying water for dust control. An excavator was digging soils from inside the pit, scooping contaminated materials with an open bucket and transferring the dirt to a haul truck that would then drive to a 90-day hazardous waste accumulation area for characterization and profiling for final disposition.

Noise levels were measured, showing employee exposures to consistently exceed the OSHA PEL of 90 dBA for an eight-hour time-weighted average. Therefore hearing protection (i.e. ear plugs or ear muffs) was required. While the ear buds that Patty was wearing may be great for listening to music (rap and hip-hop included), they certainly were not acceptable to attenuate occupational noise. Yet, loud noises from all types of equipment and processes were happening all around her.

Ethyl Mercaptan, Safety and Health Professional, now felt it was incumbent of her to call a work pause. However, before she did, she asked herself if maybe it would best to just go over to Patty and ask her...no, tell her to remove her ear buds and replace them with proper hearing protection. After all, the work site had a countless supply of earplugs, ranging in styles and noise reduction ratings. All field personnel had been trained in the proper use of ear plugs and muffs, as well as their limitations. A simple *recalibration* would do the trick. Yet Ms. Kakes was demonstrating an extreme case of "at-risk" behavior. Listening to music has become one of the more prevalent forms of distracted behavior ever since iPhones, Droids, iPods, iPads, as well as a plethora of other electronic devices hit the marketplace.

Ethyl walked over to Patty. As she approached, Ethyl called out to her in a somewhat normal tone. "Patty?" However Patty gave no indication that she heard her name being summoned. Ethyl then spoke up in a louder voice with an authoritative tone. "Patty!" Still no acknowledgement. Patty just continued to shake, rattle and roll. Ethyl looked around and was able to see that she was drawing attention from the entire work crew. The guys were smirking and some even began to mimic Patty's body motions. This time Ethyl decided to get right in front of the situation. Standing only two feet in front of Patty, Ethyl began waving her arms in a frantic motion to get her attention. This did the trick. Patty's facial expression let Ethyl know that she knew what was wrong and immediately pulled her ear buds out of her ears and turned off her phone.

"Sorry Ethyl, I guess I wasn't thinking. After our tailgate meeting I just got this song in my head and I just needed to listen to it."

Ethyl looked around the site and was able to get the attention of all the equipment operators. One at a time, she gave the traditional hand signal of a fist to "stop work."



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Within five minutes everyone was in the double wide break trailer. Ethyl had the entire work crew form a semi-circle around her.

Then Ethyl began with, “does anyone know why I stopped work?”

No one said a word. However a number of nodding heads indicated that they understood.

Ethyl continued. “OK, how many of us are familiar with the term, ‘distractive behavior/’” This resulted in just about every head motioning up and down.

“Keeping our focus on the task-at-hand is so important. We are working around heavy equipment. Coming into contact with a truck or a loader’s bucket can be quite unforgiving. In addition, there is a deep pit that has a steep slope. If we do not pay attention to our surroundings, someone could be setting themselves up for a very serious accident. Safety and health rules and regulations can only protect us so much. If we, as workers, do not own our safety program, then our programs, plans, and procedures are just words on a page.”

It can be so easy for us to get distracted at work. Personal matters can be brought into the workplace, occupying our minds when we need to be focused on our tasks. Many times we can even see when a fellow worker is “somewhere else” just by seeing a far-off stare or glaze in their eyes. Maybe we had an argument with someone the previous day or we just received some disturbing news. When these situations occur we can “zone-out” transporting our consciousness to somewhere other than our work environment.

Talking on the phone, especially nowadays with mobile devices so assessable can be very tempting for us to multitask. Either we are engaged in a conversation with a coworker, discussing some aspect of the project – such as needing additional supplies or describing a problem – or just talking to a friend or family member. If we must use our phones while in the field, then we need to remove ourselves from the immediate area where workplace hazards are prevalent.

Then, of course, there are those folks that like to listen to music. Without a doubt, music has its place in our lives: just not in the workplace. Music does present a certain enjoyment, and can alleviate boredom as well as make tedious tasks more pleasant. However, when working around heavy equipment, or excavations, confined spaces, etc., your undivided attention is a MUST.

Patty Kakes was placing herself in danger. While physically, she was in the middle of a construction site, mentally she was somewhere else. Not only was she placing herself in danger, but her fellow-workers (who were losing their focus on their tasks) were also being placed in jeopardy.

You may feel awkward or uncomfortable to approach a fellow worker that is involved in a distractive work behavior, but the fact is, you may be that last line of defense to get him/her refocused on work and therefore prevent a regrettable incident.

Question: While Ethyl Mercaptan recognized Patty was at risk due to her distracted behavior, did she do the right thing to immediately call a work pause? Could she have waited or just got Patty’s attention and talked to her individually without getting the entire field crew involved?

