

TerranearPMC Safety Share

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Week of April 15, 2019 – Feeling Hurried

Many years ago, I was teaching a HAZWOPER Course to a group of workers from the petroleum industry. The topic was emergency response and while conveying the importance of taking proper precautions during emergency scenarios, one of the participants brought up a situation which really reinforced my message. It was a real-life event which occasionally I reiterate during my current classes, as the story truly drives home a very important message; one that we can all-to-often forget or simply, in the face of trying to be timely, we may be tempted to ignore. Nevertheless, the message serves a valuable purpose by instilling how important it is to speak up when something doesn't look right, rather than looking the other way.

The story, as I remember, began when an employee noticing a drum that was left unattended at the plant's loading dock, right by the facility's railroad depot, where materials such as hazardous chemicals were brought to the facility, while products manufactured at the plant were loaded to suppliers throughout the country. Typical materials that find their way at the loading dock included various acids and bases, oils, lubricants, diesel fuel and hydrocarbons that ranged from extremely flammable to extremely toxic. The lone drum by the loading dock looked to have been well used and at first glance, no identifiers such as labels or warnings could be seen.

Company protocol called for the plant's emergency response group to be contacted. It seemed like a trivial point as the employee could have easily ignored the drum, hoping that maybe someone else would decide to do something. But the employee realized that he needed to initiate the process – otherwise if left alone, the drum could be inadvertently knocked over, causing a spill and maybe even create a chemical reaction if the contents came in contact with an incompatible material. And once that happened, there was a chance someone could have been exposed, thus suffering a serious effect via inhalation or physical contact. It was not known if these thoughts ran through the employee's head, but what was important was that he decided to take action and act in the role of a "First Responder – Awareness." Within minutes a team of four people arrived at the dock. The employee that called in the situation explained to the group that the drum was just left alone and there were no identifying features.

One man pulled out his walkie-talkie and reiterated the scenario and then proceeded to ask for the local fire department to be notified in the event that the situation possibly escalated into a danger to the plant and community. At the same time, more personnel entered the loading dock and set up boundaries around the drum and isolated the area so that unnecessary persons would not be able to enter. A decontamination station was established and soon afterwards, the group gathered to discuss their plan. The first thing that the group discussed was "how to identify the contents without opening the drum." Next, if that plan could not be accomplished, they decided on how to approach the drum for opening it and collecting a sample for characterization. Safety was the prime concern. Once the drum was opened, then the group would determine the best sampling method, based on what they observed.

In the end, the drum had to be opened. But prior to that, the team already had a strong inclination that the drum was empty. Nevertheless, two employees dressed out in level "A" gear: full face self-contained breathing apparatus in a fully encapsulated chemical resistant suit with chemical



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resistant inner gloves and butyl rubber outer gloves as well as fitting rubber boots over the safety shoes.

The drum's lid was carefully removed and sure enough, the drum was empty, showing no evidence that the drum ever contained any material – toxic, flammable, corrosive or otherwise. The entire process took almost six hours and after reporting the incident and notifying the local fire department that the investigation had concluded, and their assistance was no longer necessary, paperwork was completed, and the group removed the drum and transported it to a location where management would be able to visually inspect it and eventually have it placed in an appropriate location.

The bottom line was that after everything was said and done, no one complained or made any type of comments regarding what just took place, voicing that what just transpired was unnecessary or a waste of time. The entire team worked with a single goal in mind: Take care of the drum so any hazard it presented would be properly controlled.

No one ever suggested that a particular step should be eliminated as a way to save time. The entire team understood what needed to be done and had been properly trained to follow a strict protocol. The thought of deviating from such a rigorous process was never considered. In the end the job was successfully completed without incident.

Feeling hurried to complete a task can result in negative consequences; most notable is a serious accident. For instance, when we feel hurried we focus, not on the task we need to complete, but on merely finishing. Imagine wearing a fully encapsulated suit, where visibility and agility is already compromised. By not giving your full attention to your task, one could easily lose direction and fall from the loading dock or simply just trip and fall. Both incidents could result in an injury. Of course, beside needing possible medical attention, the specific work task of examining the drum would be placed on hold, thereby keeping the loading dock isolated and therefore, not be available for use. We can see how a simple action can result in multiple consequences effecting numerous persons; many who were not even involved with the initial unknown drum. Feeling hurried falls in the accident precursor class of “time constraint.” We cannot say that by not placing 100% focus on our tasks, that an accident will surely happen; only that we are placing ourselves at an increased risk for an accident. So, if we can eliminate this accident precursor we will have a better chance to control an unwanted and unplanned event; typically defined as an accident. It is not uncommon that when we feel hurried, we are the ones that are creating this burden and that means we can control our actions.

Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom

Thomas Jefferson

