

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of July 10, 2017 – Five Common Accident Precursors

It is said that safety doesn't happen by accident. I know; cute little play on words. The fact is, this is a common safety slogan that can be seen on hard hats, on the door of project trailers or even as a banner as one enters a construction site to remind personnel that it takes a concerted effort to achieve and maintain excellent safety performance. Please note that I didn't say "excellent safety record," as there is a big difference!

Many times when a project or organization has a good safety record, meaning a workplace has not sustained an OSHA recordable case, there is the misinterpretation that the organization has an excellent safety program. One way you can understand the difference between a safety program and a safety record, is if you ask anyone in the organization, "How did you achieve zero recordable cases over 'x-number' of years?" If workers only shrug their shoulders, that's an indication that a vibrant or robust safety program does not exist. OK, so if this is truly the case, how can a company or project wind up with a good safety record yet not have an effective safety program? Many safety experts will say that if a safety program does not address proactive controls, then a good safety record cannot be properly explained and therefore, cannot be the reason for no injuries; rather, experts agree, that such a scenario does not properly address risks to employees, and therefore, it is only a matter of time before a serious accident occurs. Thus, without an effective program, workplace incidents are subject to random chance.

But safety does not have to be a game of chance. Proven methods can be used to control accidents; and such methods require the active participation of everyone within the organization. One such program is the Integrated Safety Management System of ISMS: the adopted safety philosophy of the Department of Energy and is based on five core functions: 1) Defining the scope of work, 2) analysis of the hazards associated with the scope of work, 3) develop and implement proper controls for those identified hazards, 4) perform work within the developed controls, and 5) provide feedback for the completed work to ensure continuous improvement is achieved.

While the five steps of ISMS has been shown to be an effective program to control workplace incidents, if management and employees do not practice a concerted effort to work within the ISMS philosophy, they will be susceptible to serious workplace incidents. Working outside of a safety framework can result in significant deviations from the expected work process and therefore negatively impact a safety program. This can be the result of a deliberate intention or failure to recognize accident precursors. While there are many definitions to explain what an accident precursor is, many experts in the field of accident investigation and analysis agree that precursors are situations that, if a behavior or condition had been slightly altered where a near-miss occurred, a consequential adverse event, or accident might have happened instead. It is important to understand that even though a precursor may be present in a work environment, an accident is not necessarily the result; only that the risk of an accident greatly increases. This means that if we can control accident precursors, we can control accidents. The key factor is that we need to be able to identify these accident precursors before they are allowed to manifest themselves in an unfortunate outcome, be it an injury, chemical exposure, or damage to a



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process, equipment or property. Below is a summary of the five most common precursors. By understanding these conditions, we, as an organization can prevent workplace accidents. And this requires the commitment of management as well as those assigned field tasks.

Being in a hurry is the most common sign that we could be headed for an incident. We may feel like we have to hurry when things don't go according to plan or when we lack resources, trained personnel, or time. If we're already crunched for time, we aren't going to catch up by hurrying and getting hurt.

Changing conditions is another red flag to our safety. This includes any change in the working environment like new personnel, shift changes, reduction in number of personnel in a crew, reassignment, or changes in management. The key to eliminating hazards during personnel changes is managing the change. Statistically, we are aware that new workers, especially those in their first month on the job, are at more risk of injury. We should identify anticipated personnel changes and evaluate how this will affect the people performing the work.

That leads us to the next common precursor to an accident, a breakdown of communication. When there is a change in the work environment on a job site, and the information is not clearly handed off or communicated, that is where the hazard begins.

The fourth most common red flag is deviating from a plan. We rely on planning in construction to find efficient ways to work faster, smarter, and safer. If we have a plan in place that has been communicated to the entire team, and then we deviate from that plan, we put ourselves at risk for an accident.

The last "red flag" we should look for is the improper use or lack of equipment. Many of these precursors go hand in hand or create a domino effect. If we're in a hurry (our first red flag) we may deviate from a plan or proceed with work without the proper tools. If we bring in new personnel without proper management, the newer workers may use tools incorrectly.

We can plan ahead for all of these red flags by relying on daily safety meetings. These meetings should remind us of the proper, safe job steps and help prevent red flags from becoming incidents that lead to injuries. By taking time every day to communicate clearly and remind ourselves of the five red flags, we can eliminate hazards by planning ahead and avoiding these common precursors that cause accidents.

He, who every morning plans the transactions of the day, and follows that plan, carries a thread that will guide him through a labyrinth of the most busy life. Victor Hugo

