

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of July 5, 2017 – Pencil Whipping

All of us, at least a few times in our professional lives, have been assigned a work task where we needed to complete a checklist; perhaps this may involve numerous checklists on a daily basis. One example we can relate to is our annual physical exams. We are given a clip board that has about ten pages attached to it while the receptionists smiles at us and asks, “can you fill these papers out for me?” Well, how can one say “no” to that? Consider the alternative; what if you say that you’ve completed the same forms every year and you can assure that nothing has changed since last year. Chances are, you’ll be sitting in the waiting room for the entire day. As one who has performed this task more times than I care to count, I know how tedious checking off all those little boxes are. Each page is filled with, “have you ever had this disease, that disease or suffer from this or that symptom?” The questions go on and on. In the field of S&H it is fairly standard procedure to perform daily checks on equipment and processes. And similar to the checklists we are required to fill out in the doctor’s office, the questions do not change: same questions every single day. Indeed it is tempting to just check the “yes” box – indicating that the hydraulic fluid level is full or the slings have been checked for damage without really taking the time to check. After all, different day, same ol’stuff© What could possibly go wrong or change from yesterday?

This practice of just checking off boxes without giving the slightest hesitation or consideration to verify what one is confirming, is often referred to as *pencil whipping*. This term is a euphemism used to describe when workers, as well as supervisors, fill out forms without actually conducting an observation that is necessary to determine whether a piece of equipment or process is within the required specifications.

According to the online dictionary, Wiktionary, the definition of the term, pencil whip, is a verb meaning to approve a document without actually knowing or reviewing what it is that is being approved, or to complete a form, record, or document without having performed the implied work or without supporting data or evidence. A not too uncommon “justification” for pencil whipping is when it is announced that an audit is scheduled, so to ensure all forms are completed, a rapid review of checklists is performed, which may result in checking off items without giving a second thought.

The idea is that you are filling out forms so fast making up the data that the end of your pencil is whipping in the air. In Australia's mining industry the practice of pencil whipping is called "tic and flick."

As amusing as pencil whipping may seem, this practice can be a significant factor for contributing to or even allowing an accident to occur. Take the case of instituting a behavior based safety program; whereby workers take the time to observe unsafe work practices, such as, using a damaged ladder, or not checking the fluid levels in vehicles and/or heavy equipment, or not checking power tools or electrical cords. Of course, by not acknowledging these unsafe practices does not necessarily mean that an accident will occur; only that an at-risk conditions exist, and the more of these conditions that are observed, the greater the likelihood that an accident. This requires that each person who has been assigned to observe questionable or unsafe conditions/practices, actually takes the time to take note of their work area. If there are no unsafe conditions, then it is perfectly acceptable to report that, rather than to merely check off a box that would indicate that personnel are not wearing their safety glasses.



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Such is the actual case event for a construction company that had only the best intentions to comply with a recommendation made by safety consultants that the company should institute a behavior observation process program. Personnel were coached to ask about the number of observations that were being performed. After about a year, the organization was convinced this program was not effective as more than 1,000 observation cards were turned in a single month, yet they kept getting around two incidents each month. It was noted that observation cards were reviewed from the previous day, indicating that actions were being performed safely 100% of the time. For instance, walking under loads at a construction site is a common and a real risk with cranes everywhere. As it turns out, dozens of cards were turned in indicating that no one was walking under suspended crane loads. Yet when the safety engineer performed a verification walk-thru, he was flabbergasted as he saw nearly all the workers doing just that. There were no barricades or markings to restrict entrance to these areas while the specific pathway under investigation was observed to be the only route between two work areas. There is no way the daily observations were credible. Quite possibly, the persons tasked to make the observations did not want to get their fellow-employees in trouble. Therefore, due to merely checking off the "right" box, on paper, workplace hazards appeared to be controlled. However, the reality is that a serious condition was present and by not acknowledging this situation, those that "pencil-whipped" their observation sheets, were allowing their coworkers to be set up for a catastrophic event.

The fact is this practice of "pencil-whipping" is a prevalent concern in all types of businesses and industries. However, that does not mean this practice cannot be minimized. Below are some steps that can be applied to our work areas to help us avoid pencil-whipping situations.

The first thing that needs to be done is to admit this practice is going on. However, don't accuse, instead inquire: "How can we change this?"

While many organization have safety incentive programs, they can lead to substantial underreporting of unsafe conditions as well as non-reporting of workplace injuries. Instead of an incentive program, consider rewards, as rewards are immediate acts of acknowledgement and of gratitude. They don't have to be big, but they must be fair, and they must be based on the outcomes of behaviors that employees can control. They should specify the behaviors that happened and offer genuine appreciation or recognition.

Provide group feedback abundantly. Make visible changes. Reinforce the notion that making an accurate observation, giving feedback and reporting all make a difference. Provide the group feedback about their success: rising observations count, higher participation, injury reduction and, most of all, at-risk behaviors are more apt to be identified.

For safety observation programs, the specific line items should be revised frequently. Sometimes the problem is as simple as the old observation items got stale. This will require persons tasked to make observations to be vigilant as they cannot take the required observation tasks for granted.

Great things in business are never done by one person. They're done by a team of people - Steve Jobs

