Learning From Close Calls



WHAT'S AT STAKE?

A close call, near miss, or accident without injury is easy to shrug off and forget. But there is a danger in brushing off accidents that don't hurt, harm, or damage.

When a close call happens, it should immediately send up a red warning flag that something was wrong, unplanned, unexpected, and could happen again. The next time it happens, it could result in serious damage, injury, or death.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

The list of possible near misses in a workplace may be virtually endless.

Examples:

- A heavy object falls off a ledge or shelf and thuds to the floor a foot or so away from workers (the next falling object may find a human target).
- A worker slips on a slick surface and almost—but not quite—falls (the next person along may fall and end up in the hospital).
- A worker jumps back just in time to avoid being hit by an opening door (that door will hit somebody one of these days).

Failing to report even a small incident allows hazards to escalate into more serious situations.

Obviously, every close call is a call for action. Sometimes it's something you can fix right away yourself; other times it requires specialized attention. In either case, the close call should never be ignored and should always be reported. That way the next "real" accident may not happen after all.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

RECOGNIZE UNSAFE ACTS

The first step in dealing with Close Calls/Near Misses is to recognize unsafe acts.

Statistics tell us that most injuries are caused by unsafe acts, but most employees say they don't commit unsafe acts. This discrepancy shows that more attention needs to be placed on recognizing unsafe acts before an injury takes place.

- Being in a hurry or becoming angry tempts you to commit unsafe acts. Don't succumb to temptation; stay focused on your safety commitment.
- Don't let unsafe acts slip into your work routine.
- Take a moment to consider the safety of every action you take and avoid becoming complacent about the hazards of your work area.
- If unsafe conditions are discovered, correct or report the situation right away.
- Don't allow a poor attitude to place other workers at risk.
- Remember that reporting close calls and near miss incidents can improve your work facilities and job procedures, which helps create a safer, more productive workplace for everyone. But remember; it won't work without your participation.

According to statistics, about 3 billion "close calls" or "near misses" occur annually in United States workplaces. Statistics also show that for every 300 near misses, 29 minor injuries occur, along with one injury serious enough to keep the injured person out of work.

Reducing the number of close calls automatically lowers the odds of having minor injuries (frequency) or a major injury (severity). Near misses that go uncorrected will inevitably become accidents.

Sometimes there are multiple causes for an accident involving equipment (unguarded machinery), environment (poor lighting or noise level), people (procedures not understood or not followed), or management (allowed shortcuts). Don't rush to judge.

LEARN FROM CLOSE CALLS/NEAR MISSES:

In order to learn from close calls, the incidents must be reported and investigated.

- Employees need to understand that the purpose of studying near misses is not to punish employees or assign blame; it is to improve workplace safety and reduce injuries.
- Reporting close calls leads to improvements in work areas and job procedures while allowing the correction of unsafe conditions before an injury occurs.

Workers should inspect the work area daily for unsafe conditions or unsafe actions and, if found, report them to the supervisor. Hazard awareness is key to preventing accidents before they happen. Take steps to eliminate hazards as soon as they are discovered. Learn the real lesson from close calls. They can happen again and again until they cause injury, so tell your supervisor about every accident, no matter how minor it may seem at the time. You never know when an incident may be repeated and result in an injury or even death.

Examine the facts and find what's missing. Look for immediate and underlying causes. An immediate cause may be an unsafe condition like a mechanical failure or it could be an unsafe action by an employee. The underlying cause could be poor machine maintenance, a missing guard, a crowded work area or a lack of training.

SAFETY MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Near misses and resulting inspections may help prevent an injury or even a fatality, but an investigation cannot take place if the near miss is not reported accurately. Therefore, setting up a successful **safety management program** to ensure near misses are reported and investigated is an important step in reducing occurrences of serious incidents.

The following steps will be incorporated in a successful near-miss program:

- Create a clear definition of a near miss.

- Make a written disclosure and report the identified near miss.
- Prioritize reports and classify information for future actions.
- Distribute information to the people involved in the near miss.
- Analyze the causes of the problem.
- Identify solutions to the problem.
- Disseminate the solutions to the people impacted.
- Resolve all actions and check any changes.

Avoid The Blame Game

Do not assign blame for close calls. There is the need for a blame-free environment. People generally are not going to report a near miss/close calls if there is going to be a negative consequence for the report.

What to do:

It is important to work together to prevent a close call or an incident from happening in the future.

Some questions that should be asked about near misses:

- Were the conditions unsafe?
- Was there proper lighting?
- Was the proper equipment or tool being used for the task?
- Was the task too repetitious?
- Were there enough people for the task?
- Was the person trained in that task?
- Was the person using unsafe work practices?

FINAL TAKEAWAYS IN CLOSE CALLS SAFETY MANAGEMENT

Close call management is a powerful tool in the safety arsenal. Three things that employers can do to leverage close calls and improve their safety.

1. First, employers can make direct changes in their work practice so that close calls don’t eventually lead to recordable injuries.
2. Second, employers can use the close calls to design or locate warnings in places that can help employees avoid the hazard that the close call identified.
3. Third, employers can put recovery processes into place so that if the close call does turn into an actual incident, a faster response can minimize the damage that is done to person or property.

FINAL WORD

There are few “accidents” that happen without some advance warning. These advance warnings come in the form of close calls or near misses. Don’t dismiss a close call, instead talk about it and fix it.