Reporting Near Misses in the Workplace

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For every ten serious injuries and one fatality, there are 600 near misses*– things that almost went wrong but didn't.

The United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) strongly recommends reporting and investigating these "near miss incidents," though many companies fail to do so. Whether you didn't realize the need for reporting or don't know where to start, looking at how others successfully implement near miss reporting procedures can provide helpful insights on how to begin your program. This white paper will discuss how organizations manage near miss programs, including challenges and effective strategies.

Near miss reporting begins with safety systems in place and a culture of proactive disclosure of safety concerns. When an organization manages their injury experience and OSHA recordable incidents and is ready to add leading indicators to their data tracking and trending, the natural progression is to introduce near miss reporting. Most safety professionals agree that a facility or site audit would uncover at least one near miss condition or scenario at any time, on any day. Translating that to the workforce is where the challenge lies, as many personnel do not understand what a near miss is.

IT ALL STARTS WITH CULTURE

When a company and its employees understand the value of safety and are proactive about maintaining a safe workplace, near miss reporting becomes routine.

A program's branding and terminology can vary from organization to organization, but no matter how you present it, it should reflect your company culture. Using terms like "good catch" can encourage employee reporting of near misses by focusing on the positive. However, it is important that your employees understand what a "good catch" actually means. The term near miss is universally understood and accepted.

TRAIN YOUR EMPLOYEES

To ensure your near miss program catches on, educate your personnel on how to recognize what to report. Near misses can seem like an abstract concept, which can lead to a breakdown in communication. To you, a potentially dangerous situation is a near miss. To the employee, it's just a part of the job.

75%

of all accidents are preceded by one or more near misses**

Help personnel understand what you expect of them by providing examples of events that constitute a near miss. There are several categories of near miss situations, such as improper equipment use and job site hazards, that employees see every day. Provide detailed descriptions of each scenario and clear examples that outline the kinds of incidents to report. Ultimately, reporting is about making everyone safer, a point that should be emphasized in all near miss communications.

TIME TO ORGANIZE

Once you have developed the definition of near misses and communicated those definitions to employees, the next step is to gather information. The good ole safety suggestion box can be a great way of collecting near miss reports anonymously. Other suggestions include 1-800 numbers, mobile apps, intranet and internal technology for near miss reporting and safety suggestions. Management and supervisors should have an open-door policy when it comes to safety and workers should be able to report near misses to their direct supervisor without fear of repercussion.

Collect near miss information in the same way you would an incident in which an injury or property damage occurred. Whether a near miss happened three days ago or three years ago, the information can be useful. Everyone can learn more about job site safety when near misses are investigated and adequately understood.

TAKE ACTION

The final and most critical step is to take action with your near miss information. Treat a near miss like an incident to help identify root causes and corrective actions. If near misses are submitted anonymously, there may be some challenges gathering details and investigating, but it is still possible to better understand the situation—even if it means simple data collection. No matter how you address it, an organized system that reviews information is only effective when you take action.

Programs that successfully implement near miss reporting quickly see an uptick in data. As employees begin to view the job site differently and categorize more observations as near misses, reporting goes up. Companies can use a range of near miss reporting structures to set goals and track safety improvements. The structure can be formal—such as paper-based reporting with email action items—or informal—a simple conversation. There are also safety-tracking systems on the market that can easily incorporate near miss observations into an audit program. The most sophisticated systems are fully automated and can digest feedback in real time.

This data can be leveraged to understand when near misses are most likely to occur—be that a specific day of the week or time of day. Based on the level of information your organization collects, specific work areas or behavior aspects can be understood, i.e., if the events happened in a rework setting. Near miss reporting connected to rework—when a crew returns to the job site after completing their main scope of work—can point to easily addressed quality issues.

Strategies for collecting near miss information:

1. Ask "who, what, where, when, why, and how" questions
2. In a training setting, ask "what's the craziest thing that's happened to you at a job site?"
3. When individuals share stories and scenarios, point out what is appropriate to report as a near miss

Companies that gather detailed and organized information have evolved their near miss program from a safety initiative to quality control assistance. That evolution can give project supervision a holistic view of the job.

Increased reporting of near misses also helps make more specific and meaningful adjustments to safety procedures, quickly. One example comes from a company's anonymous safety suggestion box. An employee identified that there was no mechanism for conducting daily visual tool checks. Everyone understood that inspection of tools was essential, but supervisors were not communicating to do so; they assumed each employee was doing it on their own. The firm took action because of the report, and now supervisors discuss daily visual checks of tools and its importance.

To be truly effective, near miss reporting requires a lot of the information from the ground floor. In turn, this data needs to be communicated across the entire organization once reported implementing corrective actions adequately. The corrective actions often require time or purchasing, which are management decisions. It is imperative to ensure management is on board with not only near miss reporting but also the investigation and implementation of corrective actions that will follow. Beyond that, safety messaging and instruction is best received when they come from an immediate supervisor.

Safety should be a job site priority. Near miss reporting takes a proactive approach to maintaining a safe work environment by recognizing dangerous situations before they escalate to a

workers' compensation scenario. But no matter how well you plan, incidents can occur. Like near miss reporting, Hays Companies looks to the future to help reduce workers' compensation claims. Our assessments help identify high-risk behavior and our quantitative analysis can help lower the number of claims and potential litigation.

Visit www.hayscompanies.com for more information or to schedule a consultation.

*University of Illinois Division of Safety & Compliance, *Tool Box Talk: Near Miss*
**Construction Business Owner, *Near Misses: Identify and Eliminate Hazardous Workplace Conditions with Proper Training*

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