

Beyond The Cab

The only safety management newsletter dedicated exclusively to addressing injury prevention and workers' compensation cost control for trucking companies.



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Benefiting From an Injured Employee

It's unfortunate but true... many Safety Directors of trucking companies fail miserably at investigating and analyzing non-driving injuries. Far too many of these Safety Directors simply gather enough facts about an injury to complete the First Report of Injury Form (which is sent to the insurance carrier) and an Incident Report Form (if such a form is used).

Although forms are necessary for initiating a workers' compensation claim, filling-out the forms should be viewed as the beginning of the process... not the end.

So why do so many Safety Directors miss the boat? Why are more of them not taking the time and effort to "dig deep" into every single injury reported to them?

Perhaps too many other responsibilities, such as DOT compliance, interviewing new drivers or conducting training keep these Safety Directors from doing more. Maybe these Safety Directors are simply of the mindset that some injuries are inevitable, unavoidable or acceptable. Others who do little more than fill-out the forms in response to injuries may feel helpless, not knowing how to prevent an injury that appears (at least on the surface) to be a result of pure carelessness. Still more may have seen so many similar incidents in the past that they feel (without digging deep) that they know exactly what happened and why it happened.

The lack of intense effort aimed at understanding the specific and unique aspects of each injury can single-handedly cause a trucking company's workers' compensation claims to spiral out of control.

"History repeats itself." That statement is particularly true with respect to employee injuries. Work-related injuries with very similar causes will occur over and over throughout the years unless something is done to intervene. To be effective, that intervention must identify and address the root cause of each injury.

Recently a Safety Director of a company based in Southern Indiana applied this principal to the most common injury in the trucking industry. One of the drivers fell while exiting the cab of his truck. Instead of being content with completing the required forms, this Safety Director "dug deep," asking questions of the injured driver and others, looking at the truck, observing the footwear of the driver, etc. What was result? The Safety Director discovered that Armorall had been used on the interior of the recently purchased truck, causing the driver's shoes to become slippery. Since all trucks were obtained from the same dealer, all newly purchased trucks were being detailed in the same manner. This meant that the same fall hazard was present for every driver in a newly purchased truck. A quick call to the truck dealer was sufficient to eliminate this hazard in the future.

The determination of the Safety Director mentioned above likely prevented future similar injuries. Such focus and persistence aimed at finding the root cause of even the most common injury is absolutely essential to an effective injury prevention program.

Although no one likes it when an employee gets hurt on the job, Safety Directors should view such injuries as an opportunity to improve upon their company's injury prevention efforts. If someone got hurt, then something went wrong. Identifying the root cause of the injury and implementing a means of preventing that condition in the future will help prevent other employees from being injured in the same manner.

However, determining the root cause of injuries can be difficult. Most of the time, there are one or more "contributing factors" that are hastily (and inaccurately) labeled as the "root cause." It would have been quick and easy for the Safety Director mentioned above to claim that "failure to use 3-points-of-contact" was the root cause of the driver falling while getting out of his truck. However, that would have been inaccurate. Hence, improving or reinforcing training relative to using 3-points-of-contact would not have addressed the real "root cause" that the driver fell.

Although the fact that almost all driver injuries occur while driver is away from the company facility creates a challenge, the principals of accident investigation and analysis used in other industries can (and should) be used to help identify the root cause of each injury. These include having the injured employee *demonstrate* what happened (if it can be done safely) and asking a logical series of "why" question to get a full understanding of what happened.

Too often important details are lost and important questions are never considered because the Safety Director settles for a verbal description of a work-related injury rather than a demonstration of what happened. Although a verbal description may be all that is possible at the time that an injury is reported, a face-to-face meeting with the injured driver should be conducted the next time that the driver returns to the company facility. During this meeting the driver should be asked to demonstrate what happened and should also be asked a logical series of "why" questions that that attempt to identify the most fundamental origin (root cause) of the incident. Simply asking the injured employee "What happened?" will very rarely (if ever) provide the detail needed to truly understand the incident, identify its root cause and contemplate means of addressing that root cause.

One day an employee came into work with both of his ears bandaged. His boss asked him what happened to his ears.

The injured employee explained, "Yesterday I was ironing a shirt when the phone rang and I accidentally answered the iron instead of the phone!" "Well," the boss said, "that explains one ear, but what about the other?" "They called back!"



Employee injuries are costly, disruptive and unfortunate. Repeat accidents are worse. To be effective, Safety Directors should view each injury as an opportunity to improve upon their company's existing injury prevention efforts.