

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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Accident Investigations

WHY?

Properly and routinely conducted investigations will benefit an organization in many ways. (1) Without thorough investigation "what" happened will probably never really be known. It will continue to be anyone's opinion of just what happened and the rumor mill will increase misinformation. (2) The real causes of an accident must be determined. Too often the immediate causes are identified and then accepted as the cause. However, a thorough investigation will continue to identify the basic causes and ultimately the substandard managerial control system causes. (3) All organizations operate with risk. Prioritizing, or assessing, this risk enables management to apply limited resources accordingly. Accident investigation aids in this process. (4) Implementing controls to prevent recurrence can only be effective if the location of the "lack of control" is identified, and this is accomplished by investigation. (5) Accident investigation and subsequent analysis will identify any loss trends that exist in an organization. Trends indicate a systemic lack of control. (6) Employees will gain confidence in their organization, even after a loss producing event has occurred, provided that the accident is investigated. This action demonstrates concern for their welfare.

WHICH ONES?

Knowing which accidents to investigate is just as important as conducting the investigation. Obviously, all serious injuries must be investigated. The seriousness of a loss is defined by the organization. Often, the result of a loss-producing event is merely a matter of chance. Therefore, it becomes very important to investigate the "near miss" incidents that have high potential for loss. If it had been an unlucky day, that HIPO incident could have resulted in serious loss. This can become a challenge because most employees, supervisors, managers and executives will minimize the event and continue to focus on production or service. Unfortunately, the substandard condition or



practice is still uncontrolled and will ultimately result in a serious loss.

It's particularly important to realize that trucking company employees are injured in numerous ways – not just in motor vehicle accidents. In fact, most of the claims submitted by trucking companies involve non-driving tasks. Don't ignore these simply because they are not DOT reportable!

WHO?

Who participates in an investigation is critical to its success. Investigation efforts can be overstaffed, understaffed or inappropriately staffed. The first line leader must participate. He/she has a personal interest; knows best the people and the conditions; knows best where and how to get required information; will be the individual responsible for implementing correction; and will benefit from participation by demonstrating concern for subordinates, decreasing the work process disruption, containing cost of the incident, and demonstrating leadership. Middle managers should be involved when the seriousness of the loss will attract attention of regulators, investors or the public. In addition, when the investigation and corrective actions cross operational lines of authority; the level of authority (staffing) of the investigation team must be elevated to a level high enough to exert influence over all operational areas affected.

HOW?

Accidents don't just happen and neither do accident investigations. There must be formality to the process; otherwise they will be conducted haphazardly or not at all. Managerial support of the process is crucial. Without this endorsement, and participation, the incident investigator will quickly become frustrated with lack of support and cooperation. The investigation process will just fade away. Responsibility for conducting and participating in investigations must be placed on the appropriate personnel (supervisor, department manager, fleet manager, etc.). Otherwise, everyone will have a higher, more pressing, priority of work and no one will conduct an investigation. Conducting an investigation requires resources (time, materials, equipment,

admin assistance, and even a budget). No organization staffs itself for investigating and few budgets for it. If these requirements are not addressed by management prior to an incident, and its investigation, then the process will be stymied and the results will be less than satisfactory. It is necessary to establish the procedures for accident investigations – threshold of loss or loss potential for investigation, process of forming the investigation team, time suspense for investigation and report, report format, routing and review of report, and follow-up of corrective actions. All of these actions should involve the input of each level of supervision and management.

Accident investigations are reactive and proactive - reactive because the organization is responding to the presence of an uncontrolled hazard; and proactive because it is seeking the source of lack of control and then enabling management to establish control to preclude recurrence. And yes, investigations are the best means of explaining a particular accident – much better than speculation, postulation or any stories generated by the rumor mill.

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