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OBSERVING AND CORRECTING UNSAFE BEHAVIOR

By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control

Most of us recognize that accidents are a result of either unsafe conditions at the jobsite, unsafe acts of employees, or a combination of these. In fact, it is well known that about 90% of accidents are caused by unsafe behavior. As a supervisor, what can you do about this? Before workers cause an accident, there is a fairly simple procedure that can be easily incorporated into your duties to help correct these problems. It is called



SAFETY OBSERVATIONS.

The basic idea of safety observations is nothing more than observing employees as they perform their jobs, in order to find out if they are doing them safely. While this sounds very simple, it is a powerful tool for preventing accidents.

Supervisors have many duties that take them to all areas the area where employees are working. This is a time when looking, listening, and mental note taking provide an important sense of how things are going. It is exactly this kind of focused monitoring that can spot unsafe acts or practices. A key to effective by preventing accidents is to make a *habit* of safety observations as you walk through the area. This is a routine you will need to develop. One way to do this is to remind yourself that you are going to look for unsafe practices *every time* you walk through the plant.

Assuming you agree that the idea of safety observations has merit, the next question is, what do you look for? You will need to study people since you will be looking for unsafe acts or practices. Which people should you observe? Consider starting with new employees, accident repeaters, known risk takers, those with personal distractions, and tasks known to be hazardous.

New / Inexperienced Employees

Inexperienced employees need frequent safety observations. Statistics prove that new employees have the highest accident rates. If you don't spot and correct unsafe practices early, they may become ingrained habits. Inexperienced employees include those who have never done the job before, who have not worked a particular job for a long time, or who only do the job occasionally.

Accident Repeaters

Some people seem to have an affinity for accidents, so we call them "accident repeaters." By observing them as they do their jobs, we can often discover clues as to why they are being injured. They may be working too fast, they may not have the proper tools, they may need additional training, or perhaps they just don't have the aptitude for the job.

Risk Takers

In any group of people there seem to be one or two that are always ready to assume unnecessary risk. They don't hesitate to violate safety rules to save themselves time or effort. They seem to believe it is manly to take risks, or that they are immune to getting hurt. Just knowing they are being observed sometimes reduces this kind of behavior.

The key to effective accident preventions is to make a *habit* of safety observations as you walk through the area.

Personal Distractions

Although you probably avoid getting involved in the personal lives of your crew members, you may notice when they seem preoccupied or less than attentive to their work. You may observe a difference in their attitude or overhear rumors, suggesting that personal problems are occupying their attention. Drug or alcohol use may also be affecting their actions or judgment. Observations may confirm your suspicion that they are a hazard to themselves or others, and that their unsafe behavior should be corrected. In the event of drug or alcohol use it should also be documented. Address these issues by strictly following your company's substance abuse policies and procedures.

Hazardous Jobs

Not all jobs are equally hazardous. Some tasks or operations almost never are associated with accidents. While other activities may be well known as having a higher risk for accidents. Most jobs probably fall somewhere in between. Your focus should be upon work tasks, which have shown a history of repeated accidents or a known potential for serious injury.

Benefits of Safety Observations

You already know the purpose of safety observations—to spot unsafe practices. There are other reasons for making them as well, such as to:

1. Check the effectiveness of training
2. Provide on-the-spot correction of unsafe actions
3. Provide opportunities for compliments
4. Develop cooperative safety behaviors
5. Suggest better job methods

Be sure you make it clear to employees know that you don't want them to get hurt! Be clear and specific about how they should work safely.

· **Check the Effectiveness of Training**

The best and sometimes only way a supervisor can be sure employees have absorbed their initial job training is to watch them do the job. Even after being trained, most people are reluctant to admit they don't fully understand the task. When observed work performance doesn't meet high safety standards, question the employee about specific accident prevention measures that should be used for that job. Find out if they *were* trained and if they *know* what to do

· **Make Prompt Corrections**

This is the time to deliver immediate on-the-spot safety training and catch unsafe practices before they become habits. This type of training uses correction for the good of employees, not just to criticize. Be sure you make it clear to employees that you don't want them to get hurt! Be clear and specific about how they should work safely.

· **Provide Opportunities to Compliment**

Most observations will confirm that employees are working safely. This provides a good opportunity for supervisors to compliment them for a job well done. Everyone appreciates a kind word now and then, and most will respond with even greater cooperation after they have been praised for doing the job right. Remember: People tend to *repeat* behavior that is rewarded!

· Reinforce Proper Safety Behavior

When supervisors make safety observations a regular practice, it helps strengthen proper behavior. By making this a habit, and especially by complimenting safe work behavior, you let employees know that you are serious about safety. They know accident prevention is a high priority. Despite how some individuals resist following the rules, most employees appreciate and take pride in a safe workplace.

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· Suggest Better Job Methods

Another benefit of making regular safety observations is that you frequently discover new ideas about how the job can be done better. You may discover ways to eliminate waste or to use tools or methods more efficiently. Often these ideas will come from the workers themselves, if you ask them for input.

Steps for Observation

A. Preparation

There are three simple things you should do to prepare for an observation. First, consider who you might focus upon. Have a reason for those you select. There may be something about particular crew members such as inexperience, a reputation for risk taking, an accident history, or some physical or mental condition that could influence unsafe work. Next, consider the tasks within the job that you intend to observe, based upon potential for accidents. The last step in preparing for an observation is to refresh your memory about the key safety points of the job. Whether this step is necessary or not depends on how familiar you are with the task and the safety precautions that apply. If there is a JSA (Job Safety Analysis) on this operation, it will help to review it briefly.

B. Make the Observation

Most will agree that it is not a good idea to observe people from a concealed position. This is not only risky, but it is unnecessary and can be awkward. If someone sees you hiding, you can be sure that the word will get around. No one likes to be spied upon. Just observe at a distance from any normal position as you go about making casual observations of the area. There is no need to hide your observations—they are being done to protect your employees from injury. In many cases it is wise to approach the employee and describe exactly what you will be doing. This allows the worker to be an active participant in the safety observation process. Remember, the purpose of safety observations is not just to catch people doing things wrong. The purpose should be constructive—to prevent accidents and to apply friendly persuasion and correction when needed.

There is no need to hide your observations—they are being done to protect your employees from injury.

You may want to develop your own system for targeting work tasks in your particular operation. You may start by asking yourself: *“What is the worst thing that could happen here?”* or *“What injuries could occur if the unexpected happens?”*

C. Five Principles for Focus:

- 1. Reactions of workers to your presence:** These reactions usually occur within 10 to 30 seconds after employees become aware that they are being observed, and may provide clues to unsafe acts. If employees put on their protective equipment when they see you, change position suddenly, or rearrange the job, it may indicate unsafe acts being covered up.
- 2. Personal Protective equipment:** Are all types of PPE necessary for this job, such as hard-hats, safety glasses, hearing protection, respirators, and other protective equipment available and being properly used?

3. **Potential injury causes:** What is the potential injury causes from this operation? Can employees be struck by something, caught in, or exposed to falls? Can they potentially contact high voltage lines, be exposed to a hazardous substance, or overexert themselves while lifting? What other hazards are present?
4. **Tools & Equipment:** Are the right tools being used for this job? Are tools being used correctly? Are tools & equipment in good condition?
5. **Job procedures:** Does it appear that proper procedures are being followed or are shortcuts being taken? Are the procedures adequate and understood?

D. Correcting Unsafe Practices Or Behavior

If work tasks were being carried out in a less than safe manner, the worker should be corrected. The form of correction will depend on the situation, the severity of the hazard and your company policy. It may range from simple re-instruction, a friendly persuasion, a firm warning, or even disciplinary action. Consider the potential risk to the worker and others when deciding how to respond to what you've observed. Often a tactful re-instruction is all that is needed when it is obvious that the worker was not aware they were acting unsafely. If they have been warned before however, discipline and documentation may be in order.

About Re-Instruction:

First tell the worker exactly what you observed that was done unsafely. Then clarify why it was unsafe, and what could happen if they proceed in that manner. Finally explain the safe way to do the job by both describing and showing the proper way to do it. Check to make sure you have been understood by asking the worker to demonstrate the safe way to do the task. Remember—be supportive of their own personal safety, and never make the employee feel foolish.

End your instruction with a case in point if you can. For example, you might describe a back injury case that resulted from unsafe lifting, and how this kept the employee from working for a long time.

Recording Your Observations:

Although recording your safety observations is not required, there are several reasons for doing so:

- In case of an OSHA visit, a record of these observations can help to substantiate your efforts to train your employees and enforce safety rules. Records of your observations will also help identify problem areas where more training is needed.
- These records can also help to focus loss prevention efforts where they will do the most good—before an accident occurs.
- Some companies have created printed forms that list the five areas for observations, with corresponding columns where notes can be recorded.

Since accidents slow production as well as profits, monitoring of unsafe work behavior is a valid way to improve production.

In Summary:

Safety observations are an effective tool that individual supervisors can use to reduce the incidence of unsafe acts in their division. It is traditional for supervisors to monitor production, but since accidents both slow production and impact profits, monitoring of unsafe work behavior is also a valid way to improve company profits.

Safety observations must become a habit if they are to have any real value. They should be done each time you walk through a work area—preferably daily—rather than on a hit-or-miss basis. You will discover a greater number of unsafe practices if you take time to deliberately conduct safety observations. Then, with consistent corrections and behavior changes, fewer unsafe acts will be found and the frequency of injuries and accidents should decrease.