The Importance of Reporting Incidents

OSHA defines a near miss as an incident in which no property was damaged and no personal injury was sustained, but where, given a slight shift in time or position, damage or injury easily could have occurred. Near misses also may be referred to as close calls, near accidents, accident precursors, injury-free events and, in the case of moving objects, near collisions.

No matter how trivial, incidents should be reported to Supervisors just as accidents are. Employees should be encouraged and periodically reminded about the importance of reporting incidents, or as they are frequently called, near misses. I am giving you just such a reminder right now.

Why Incidents Should Be Reported
Nothing is learned from unreported incidents. Hazards, causes, and contributing circumstances are lost if not reported. Employees who don't take the time to report near misses they are involved in may not learn from them. The fact that many incidents come within inches of being disabling injury accidents makes failing to report them all the more serious.

When incidents are not reported, their causes usually go uncorrected. That means they may happen again, perhaps producing tomorrow's disabling injury or fatality.

This can be illustrated by the case of the worker who slipped on a floor made slippery by a small leak in a hydraulic line. He did not suffer any injury. Two days later, when the line was still leaking, another employee slipped on the liquid, fell, and broke her leg. At that point the first employee told the company investigating the accident about his own previous near miss. Had he reported it promptly, chances are the defective hydraulic line would have been repaired before the accident happened.
Why Incidents Often Are Not Reported
There are many reasons why a worker might choose not to report an incident in which he or she was involved. All of these are understandable, but we should recognize that none of them are acceptable when we realize why the report should have been made.

What are some of the reasons workers don't report incidents? Probably the most common is failure to understand the importance of reporting and the harm that could result by not doing so.

Here are some others reasons:
- Fear of Management disapproval
- Not wanting the incident on their work records
- Dislike for the red tape involved
- Not wanting to lose time from the job assignment
- Reluctance to spoil the department’s safety record
- Not wanting to be the subject of an incident investigation

What Can Be Learned from an Incident?
The whole purpose of reporting—and investigating—a near-miss incident is to find ways of making sure the same elements that were present on that occasion don't result in an accident at some future time.

So here are some questions to which answers must be sought:
- What were the circumstances surrounding the near miss? Was there a hazard that the employee should have been aware of?
- Is there a safety rule covering the situation? If so, did the almost-victim know it? If there isn't such a rule, should there be one?
- Were any safety devices, clothing, or equipment used improperly or not used at all when they were called for?
- Have there been other near misses of the same type?

The answers should suggest ways to prevent a recurrence. Perhaps there need to be new rules or procedures developed. Or maybe more thorough training is required. In any case, the reporting of the incident is the vital first step.

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