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Accidents Don't Just Happen

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Whenever there's an accident, whether the result is a fatality or a broken plate or anything in between, someone is sure to ask: "How did it happen?"

Accidents on the job don't "just happen". They are caused by the actions or inactions of one or more people.

Let's suppose, just to illustrate what I'm talking about, that you fall on the stairs at home and break a leg. That accident didn't "just happen"; there was no evil spirit putting the hex on you or lurking in the shadows to trip you. No, there was at least one quite tangible cause.

The odds are that the fall was your own fault—that some act of yours (or failure to act) was to blame. Maybe you were in a hurry and took the stairs faster than usual—faster than was safe. Maybe you were carrying an awkward load that put you off balance and kept you from grabbing the railing to steady yourself. Maybe you forgot to turn on the light over the staircase. Maybe your eyesight has been playing tricks on you, but you've put off seeing an eye doctor and getting proper glasses. There are probably dozens of other "maybes" that boil down to your being the cause of your own fall.

On the other hand, maybe there was someone else involved: one of the children left a toy on the step, or whoever discovered the stair light burnt out failed to replace the bulb. There could even be a combination of causes: You were in a hurry and didn't turn on the light, so you didn't see the toy that someone else left there, against the rules.

Now for the good news. Just as people cause accidents to happen, they can prevent them from happening. That's the reason for the safe work practices. It is why there is regular training sessions to inform and remind you of ways to keep yourselves and your co-workers safe. It is the reason personal protective equipment is provided to help keep a potential hazard from causing actual harm.

Editor's Note:

The KING Safety Matters newsletter is published monthly to provide general safety information. It is not a substitute for adequate safety training, or intended to provide complete safety information or training, on any specific subject. The information contained herein is intended to assist safety efforts, and increase safety awareness.

In order to ensure the contents of the newsletter are helpful and important to you, please feel free to send comments, suggestions and feedback to:

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But no work practices, rules, training, or equipment can prevent an accident from happening. You do that. You follow safe transfer procedures; you clean up spills; you tag and report a damaged equipment; you wear your safety glasses or gloves.

Some of us have special responsibilities that have an effect on everyone's safety. A maintenance supervisor, for example, has to do his or her job correctly or mechanical failures could be followed by accidents. The safety committee chairperson must be sure to post any change in evacuation procedure. And so on. But for the most part, your own safe behavior is your own greatest safeguard. Remember that when you're tempted to take a shortcut or break the safety rule "just this once" or "just for a minute." That one minute could be exactly when the accident doesn't "happen" but is caused.

In the safety profession we have all but eliminated the use of the word "accident". We now use incidents. Why the change in names? Change a word and change the attitude! Incidents occur because the causes for them were not identified, controlled and/or ignored.

Here is a five step system for identifying and eliminating causes of incidents:

- Step 1 – Look around and think about what could happen. Then think about what could go wrong.
- Step 2 – Figure out how you could prevent what you have identified from going wrong. Keep it simple.
- Step 3 – Put your solutions into action. This controls the causes you identified from contributing to an incident.
- Step 4 – Go to work, but while you are working think about what you are doing, if you see a new problem stop working and start at step one again.
- Step 5 – While you are working continuously watch out for new problems, if any arise, go back to step one.

What if you can't think of a way to control a cause you have identified? If you are willing to take a little time, there are not many problems that cannot be solved. The whole point of identifying the causes of incidents is to prevent them from hurting people. With the problems identified we need to take the steps to do this. If not, it's people that pay the price.

