Close Calls Reflect Accident Hazards

A worker received an electric shock on a piece of equipment he was using. He was not injured, and he did not report the incident. A few days later another worker also received a shock from the same defective equipment, and again did not report the problem. Within days a third worker also received an electrical shock which killed him.

This true story illustrates what can happen when we ignore close calls in the work place. A close call is a chance to identify a hazard and correct it before someone is seriously injured or killed.

We have all had many experiences with close calls (also known as free warnings) in our everyday lives. The best thing we can do is to pay attention to them and learn from them. For example, most of us have slipped while rushing down a stairway. We may have caught ourselves before falling, and then resolve to slow down in the future. Another example is pulling out to pass when driving and being faced with an on-coming car. We quickly pull back into our own lane, and tell ourselves next time we will make sure it is safe before we try to pass.

In both instances, there was the potential for a serious accident but we were lucky. We have learned something by the close call, and will probably be more aware in the future.

Close calls in the workplace serve the same function. They give us an opportunity to recognize that something is wrong and to do something about it before someone gets hurt.

There are a number of common reasons for not reporting close calls. One is that we don’t want to get into trouble with a supervisor or fellow worker. Another reason might be embarrassment. Nobody likes to admit to being part of an accident or close call. Or we might find it is too much trouble to report

it—forms to fill out and interviews to endure. Another possible reason is that reporting an incident might ruin our crew's safety record, causing the loss of an incentive prize.

Of course, none of these reasons amount to much when you consider that reporting a close call might save a co-worker from serious injury or death. Imagine what it would be like to watch a buddy die because of a hazard which you knew about but did not report. Think about it—what if you were the only one who knew materials were being stacked unsafely, because just last week you had to jump out of the way of a falling object? How would you feel if another worker was crushed and killed when the stack collapsed again?

When an accident occurs and someone is injured or killed, chances are someone else knew that the hazards existed. Think about that. Someone else probably had a hunch that the brakes were worn out, or the emergency exit was blocked, or the chemical container was in a position to be knocked over or whatever

How do you think that person will feel after an accident occurs? Chances are, he'll wish he had reported the hazard.

A number of companies which have enviable safety records say that they treat close call incidents as if they were fatalities. They say that the aim is not to place blame, but to figure out the basic cause of the accident. By treating close calls as seriously as accidents, we can have fewer tragedies.