How to Overcome Reluctance to Report

Getting employees to report near misses is a challenge. Employees often question the value of reporting what they've seen. Indeed, many fear that coming forward with a report will cause trouble and lead to punishment.

However, there's an effective technique to overcome reluctance: Analogize near misses at work to incidents at home. Since many workers are parents—and all of them were once children—this casts the subject in a light to which they can readily relate. Here's one way to use the technique.

Near Misses Happen at Work and Home

A Near Miss is an undesired event that, under slightly different circumstances, could have resulted in harm to people or damage to property, materials or the environment. Proper reporting of Near Misses is essential and the investigation that follows is for the purpose of training, educating and preventing future incidents or injury.

Near Miss is a term used by occupational health and safety professionals. But incidents also take place outside the workplace. Parents frequently handle Near Miss situations at home. Here's a tale of a domestic near miss to illustrate how this works.

The Near Miss Occurs

You tell your 16-year-old son (let's call him Junior) to wash the dishes. Junior drops a carving knife while loading the dishwasher. The knife falls violently to the ground and lands blade-down on the kitchen floor, just missing the foot of Junior's little sister, Suzie, by a few centimeters.

That is a Near Miss. As a parent, you will want to know what happened so you can take steps to ensure it doesn't happen again.

But will Junior or Suzie tell you about the incident?

Junior and Suzie Must Decide Whether to Report It

It depends. Through life experience and social conditioning, children are encouraged not to report situations that cast a "supposedly" negative light on themselves or anyone else. And, in many families, there's an unwritten code among siblings to keep misbehavior a secret and not "tattle tale to mom and dad."

The motivation for such behavior is to protect oneself and one's siblings from punishment. But there are ways to defuse this. One way is to persuade your children to always tell the truth and promise they won't be punished for doing so.

The Happy Ending

Let's say Junior does in fact come forward and tell you what happened. Like a good parent should, you investigate the incident and assess the risk of a recurrence. As a result, you discover that Junior:

- Always rushes to load the dishwasher (1st mistake); and
- Grabs knives by the blade instead of the handle (2nd mistake).

But now that you know what's going on, you are in a position to educate Junior on the dangers of always being in a rush and the proper handling of knives. The problem is resolved and dishwasher loading becomes safer at your home.

The Unhappy Ending

Junior and Suzie don't report the incident. So you have no reason to suspect that Junior is rushing to load the dishwasher and handling knives by the blade. And since no injuries have occurred, the improper behavior is reinforced. So it's repeated.

Two weeks later, Junior asks permission to go out with his buddies on Friday night. Your response: "Okay, but only after you load that dishwater." Junior accepts the deal but is in an even bigger hurry than usual to complete his chore. He distractedly grabs a

steak knife by the blade and slices open his hand.

This accident could have been avoided. But it wasn’t because you didn’t know about Junior’s dangerous loading techniques until after an injury occurred. The Near Miss, in other words, represented an opportunity to fix the problem before it led to an injury. Unfortunately, that opportunity was lost since the Near Miss wasn’t reported.

Conclusion

This is simple stuff. But it’s surprising how placing the importance of Near Miss reporting in the context of the home situation drives home the message to employees. The technique has a secondary benefit: In addition to encourages the reporting of Near Misses, it also enables parents to consciously build on the practice at home and thus eliminate dangers that threaten their families. So give it a try.