NAC Executive Insights

Safety Culture Series

How to Prevent Employees from "Hiding" Injuries

Key Points

- There are many reasons why workers may not report an injury.
- Workers need to understand the need for injury reports in providing learnings for improvement in the organization's Safety Management System.
- The primary purpose of reporting injuries is to improve safety culture, not to assess blame and punishment.
- Leaders at all levels need to demonstrate the importance of injury reports in improving safety culture and eliminating at-risk behaviors.
- Belief in a zero-injury outcome underpins safety culture.
- Ultimately, discouraging "hidden injuries" comes down to creating a caring, supportive workplace that has a strong safety culture.
- Creating a caring supportive workplace helps drive a strong safety culture.

Introduction

This Executive Insight describes why employees may be tempted to avoid reporting injuries and suggests ways a carefully designed safety culture can make this occurrence more unlikely.

Why Would Injuries Be Hidden?

There are numerous potential reasons why an employee may fail to report an injury. Five of these are listed below:

Embarrassment — At work locations where a good record of safe performance exists, employees may feel they have "let the team down" if they report an injury that ends the recording of many hours that has been worked injury-free.

1. **Peer Pressure** — Where employers reward the workforce for achieving specific safe work-output statistics (e.g., days without a recordable injury), an employee may

face peer pressure to avoid reporting injuries that could impact rewards (particularly monetary rewards) for the entire workforce.

2. **Inconvenience** — When an injury occurs near the end of a shift and there is limited time to go through what may be perceived as a lengthy reporting process, the employee may choose not to report an injury.

3. **Fear** — Employees will avoid reporting an injury at workplaces where the safety programs contain various forms of punishment or even termination of an employee if injured.

4. **Perceived insignificance of injury** — An employee may view an injury as minor and consider it "not a problem" if they believe they can simply wash it off and administer first aid at home.

Setting Safety Targets

When an organization sets a goal to reduce its injury rate to some number above zero, it is inadvertently implying that a certain number of injuries are acceptable. It is logical, however, to conclude that no organization wants anyone to be injured. On this basis, a zero-injury target is the obvious choice of all caring organizations.

Personalizing this subject to an extreme, the following question is posed: Would you prefer a family member to work in either an organization where a low level of injuries is acceptable or in an organization that has a commitment to zero injuries?

The Importance of Assuring All Injuries Are Reported

Injury reports are important to gauge the effectiveness of an organization's safety culture. Injury reports serve as invaluable sources of learnings that can lead to needed changes in the organization's Safety Management System (see the Executive Insight, Introduction to the Safety Culture Series).

This requires that injury reports be thorough, well written, and address root causes. Often it is important to know *why* a behavior occurred rather than that the fact that it *did occur and violated* prior training or a safe work practice. Injury reports provide essential feedback to help an organization reach the goal of zero injuries.

Injury reports can also have an important role in resolving legal issues. Not having such reports can indicate a lack of attention by the organization in assuring the safety of its workers.

What Can Be Done to Avoid Injuries Being Hidden?

To ensure all injuries are reported, the entire workforce must believe that a zero-injury outcome is possible. This can only occur when the leadership and workforce are aligned and supportive in creating a safety culture that is free of at-risk behaviors. This belief will help to drive safe behaviors and will support the reporting of any injuries or accidents should they occur.

Ultimately, discouraging "hidden injuries" comes down to creating a caring, supportive workplace that has a strong safety culture, as described in the Executive Insights listed in the For Further Reading section of this Insight. By involving the workforce and gaining their support in creating a strong safety culture, workers will be more agreeable to and help in establishing the reporting of all injuries.

Blame and punishment should be avoided in all but the most egregious events. Leadership should focus on using injury reports as teaching tools to adjust behaviors and work practices rather than to punish an individual or group for making a mistake by not following procedures.

Leaders must create an environment where they listen to the views and ideas from the workforce to improve safety. It is important that leadership display empathy and demonstrate by their actions that lessons are learned and implemented from injury reports. Learning from injuries, rewarding employees for the actions they take to create a safer workplace, and recognizing people for intervening when appropriate to eliminate at-risk behaviors are all effective ways to drive safety performance and ensure accurate injury reporting occurs. Punishing those who make an honest mistake when an injury is reported is counterproductive to safety.

A strong safety culture is underpinned by leaders and workers taking action when an injury occurs. This is critically important as it reinforces the team's belief that a zero-injury outcome is possible.

The Executive Insight, "Improving Construction Profitability," describes how a strong safety culture can improve construction profitability and increase employee morale, dedication, and productivity. It drives home the point that investing in a strong safety culture can deliver a tremendous return on investment.

Conclusion

This Executive Insight describes why workers may avoid reporting injuries and demonstrates how a strong safety culture can prevent employees from "hiding injuries." Workers need to believe that injury reports address root causes and are utilized to make improvements in an organization's Safety Management System.

Leadership's primary goal should not be to punish, but to provide learnings that help accomplish a "zero-injury" goal. This requires active engagement by leadership to ensure that learnings from the event are implemented. Equally important is to involve workers in creating the safety program and in workers accepting the challenge to eliminate "at-risk" behaviors. Doing so will help leadership and the workforce establish the underpinning of a strong safety culture.

For Further Reading – Safety Culture Series (Executive Insights)
- [Introduction to the Safety Culture Series](#)
- [Safety Culture – Human Performance Principles](#)
- [Safety Culture – Worker Participation in the Safety Management System (SMS)](#)
- [Safety Culture – Demonstrating a Culture of Care and Support: The Leaders' Role](#)

- Safety Culture – Drug and Alcohol Testing
- Safety Culture – Incident/Accident/Near-Miss Reporting and Investigations
- Safety Culture – Safety Training
- Safety Culture – Safe Work Practices
- Safety Culture – Management Commitment: All Safety Incidents Are Preventable
- Safety Culture – Subcontractor Involvement in the Safety Culture
- Safety Culture – Recognition and Reward
- Safety Culture – Job Safety Analysis
- Safety Culture – Leadership Involvement in Office and Site Visits
- Safety Culture — Improving Construction Profitability

About the Author

Emmitt Nelson was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2000. He is co-founder of the Zero Injury Institute and a leading construction industry safety expert. He founded Nelson Consulting, Inc. in 1994 and began offering consulting services for contractors and owners in creating zero injury cultures. Emmitt served as chair of the Construction Industry Institute Zero Accidents Research Team from 1990-1994 and chaired the NAC Safety Committee from 2005-2014.