



NAC Executive Insights

Safety Culture Series

Incident/Accident/Near Miss Reporting and Investigations

Key Points

- Incident/accident/near miss reporting and investigations are critical to Safety Management System (SMS) success.
- The investigative approach is focused on root causes and one of “fact finding” and not “fault finding.”
- Investigations are best performed with input from those closest to or involved in the incident.
- Reporting and feedback should be shared with all employees who might benefit, especially craft personnel.

Introduction

This Executive Insight discusses the importance of incident/accident/near miss reporting, investigations, and feedback in the Safety Management System (SMS). When leadership creates the proper non-threatening environment, incidents/accidents/near misses are effectively reported and investigated, workers proactively seek and identify near misses to report and share, and workers are focused on doing their part in a safe, risk-free manner. This environment enhances the safety culture, promotes employee/worker engagement, improves hazard identification, and ensures implementation of lessons learned, early resolution of safety issues/unsafe conditions, and continuous improvement.

Incidents/Accidents/Near Misses Defined

Safety incidents, accidents, and near misses are distinct concepts within the Safety Management System. A *safety incident* refers to any unexpected event or occurrence that has the potential to cause harm to people, property, or the environment. These incidents may or may not result in actual harm. *Accidents* are incidents that result in actual harm, injury, damage, or loss. *Near misses* are incidents where a potential hazard or dangerous situation arises and does not lead to any harm or damage due to timely intervention or other factors. They serve as valuable opportunities for identifying vulnerabilities and improving safety behavior and protocols.

A Reporting and Investigation Program is Critical to a Zero-Injury Culture

Accidents cause negative consequences. They trigger investigations into root causes to prevent a recurrence. Incidents and near misses occur much more frequently than accidents and are the source of important learnings about the safety culture, behavior, and protocols that could lead to a future accident. With a reporting and investigation program in place, incidents and near misses are investigated as thoroughly as accidents.

An effective reporting and investigation program is critical to creating and maintaining a “Zero-Injury Safety Culture.” Such a reporting and investigation program reflects leadership’s genuine concern for employees’ safety and welfare and of their personal commitment to do whatever it takes to prevent an injury or an incident.

Near Miss Reporting and Investigation

Although a near miss is an “unwanted event,” the timely reporting, investigation, and sharing of it is a “wanted event.” The success of an SMS program depends directly on company leadership and expert handling of this inherent conflict. How near miss reports are encouraged, received, investigated, and how feedback is shared are all a measure of a company’s “Zero-Injury Safety Culture,” genuine care, and trust.

Training, education, and continuous reinforcement must be provided to all employees so that they respond and behave in a positive manner when made aware of a near miss. Leaders must always compliment the reporting individual in an earnest, sincere manner and share the investigation and required actions to protect all employees from similar unwanted events.

The following actions set the stage for effective near miss reporting and investigations.

- 1) The company ensures it conducts a non-threatening, effective near miss reporting and investigation process on all projects/activities.
- 2) A formal, documented system is in place to report near misses.
 - a) A near miss is defined in simple terms.
 - b) Reporting documentation is streamlined and timely, not oppressive.
 - c) Investigative approaches are focused on root causes and “fact finding,” not “fault finding.”
 - d) Investigations are best performed with input from those closest to or those involved in the incident. Workers are key to identifying what went wrong and how similar incidents can be avoided in the future. Investigations foster worker accountability and commitment.
- 3) Workers are continuously encouraged to report near misses.
 - a) Reports are actively sought and openly welcomed. Employees are empowered to suggest improvements to prevent future occurrences, including changing work processes.
 - b) Leadership recognizes and rewards workers.

- c) All affected employees receive timely feedback on investigations, lessons learned, and actions to prevent future incidents. Feedback to the workers is timely so as to promote increased future reporting.
- 4) The reporting and investigation process is periodically assessed and adjusted to improve the program. Leadership proactively seeks workers' suggested improvements to increase the program's effectiveness, the workers' co-ownership and commitment, and to continuously enhance the safety culture.

Incident and Accident Reporting and Investigation

In the event of an incident or accident, a similar approach to that described above is adopted. Often, safety professionals and a trained root cause analysis expert assist in the investigation. The investigative team also may include individuals from other company departments in order to provide an independent assessment of the incident or accident.

Conclusion

An effective incident/accident/near miss reporting and investigation program is critical to creating and maintaining a "Zero-Injury Safety Culture." Such a program helps establish the foundation for a leadership/worker trusting and caring environment. Worker co-ownership is key to leveraging the program and achieving the company's commitment to zero injuries and incidents.

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](#)

About the Author

Mike Loose was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2013. Mike retired from the U.S. Navy as a vice admiral and later from the Parsons Corporation as its corporate operations officer. He is well known for his distinguished military service and as a senior leader in the construction industry. Mike has contributed significantly throughout his career in creating exceptional safety cultures and leading world class safety performance.

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