

Incident Imaging – Let’s Imagine

OH&S experts struggle with establishing the essential measurements of what makes a workplace healthy and safe and yet there’s been a lot written in recent years about “leading indicators” of safety. Although the “components” of what makes a great safety culture will continue to be refined and re-established as more evidence comes to light, one fact seems to be evident without many opposing views. Safety requires a high level of worker involvement. For many years we’ve known from Dr. Dan Petersen’s Six Criteria for Safety Excellence that you simply can’t have a safety excellent culture without employees being involved. Bottom line is that engaging your employees in safety activities is essential to creating a culture which results in truly getting safety results.

So let’s explore a technique we can use to encourage and engage our workers in establishing a richer safety culture.

Let’s Imagine

We’ve all done it as kids-...let’s imagine. This technique is a wonderful way to learn from your workers what they think the safety problems and solutions are in an engaging and often fun way.

It starts simply enough. Simply ask your employees, “What would be the worst incident that we could have here?” Or you could ask “What things do we do in our work here that could cause us to get hurt?” Then stand back and listen. It’s important to remind everyone not to use anyone’s name if they start to discuss real situations. If you empower your employees in a non-threatening atmosphere to talk about what “could” happen, you will open the door for them to tell you about all the incidents that they’ve experienced and didn’t take the time to report it like perhaps they should have. In this forum of “let’s imagine” They can give details of what has happened or nearly happened without the fear of embarrassment. For example, I could tell you that I wasn’t paying attention as I walked backwards, almost falling into the inspection pit. But this really happened to a cousin of mine...never to me (wink).

Truly Proactive

Many of the activities we involve ourselves in are labeled as proactive, but are really just using our experience to anticipate what might happen in the future. Incident Imaging does exactly that. We use our knowledge about what we do at work and project what could happen. The real beauty of this approach is that it gives you an opportunity to uncover things that have happened in a non-threatening environment. Imagine a group of your employees discussing possible incidents. During the brainstorming session it’s very possible and highly likely that some of your employees will start to feel comfortable about telling the group about things that have actually happen, but framing it in an “it could happen” situation.

The beauty of this approach is it stimulates worker groups to use their imagination to think through what they do on a daily basis and what could happen if they don’t control the hazards associated with their assigned tasks.

Incident Imaging Process

1) With small groups of employees working in teams, give them an assignment to list the incidents that could happen doing one of their regular tasks. For example, if you have a group of workers who regularly install water pipes in trenches they would no doubt list something like:

- Fall into trench
- Muscle strains – over lifting
- Trench collapse
- Hit by machinery
- Trip on uneven ground
- Traffic enters work area
- Hit by pipe being unloaded
- Extreme temperatures
- Underground utility strike

The rules of brainstorming apply here. We don't evaluate the suggestions; we just let the employees list them.

2) Once the issues are listed then each one is analyzed by asking the worker group how those situations could be created. What conditions would have to be in place to let some be injured by each of the listed incidents? For example:

Trench collapse - What conditions would have to be in place for this to actually happen?

- No cutback
- We don't use the trench cage (box)
- We don't install shoring
- We enter an unprotected trench/excavation
- We're in a rush so someone just jumps down for a second to retrieve a tool

3) The next step is to talk about and list how can we prevent these situations from happening?

Here's Problem Solving 101. List the ideas your people have on how to prevent the situations from developing. You'll find the underlying causes that need to be addressed. Some people call these "root causes". Personally I try to avoid rating causes by titles and just list all the causes that people think may create the situation. For example:

- Shoring materials may not be readily available, creating a delay, therefore creating a "rush" situation.
- We could forget our tools in the bottom of the trench after the shoring has been removed.
- Location of the pipe installation is too close to underground utilities to properly cutback the sides of the trench.

4) Develop solutions

Here comes the fun part. We simply come up with solutions to these imagined causes. I think it will become pretty apparent that both real and imagined problems will come to light and the discussion will turn from problem identifying to problem solving. For example:

- Change the minimum inventory numbers of shoring materials held in the storage yard.
- Create a quick inspection checklist before the shoring is removed.
- Hold pre-job meetings to remind everyone that entering the excavation before shoring is installed and after it is removed should not be done for any reason.

5) Assign the fixes and hold people positively accountable to get them done.

There's nothing worse than going to a meeting or session where solutions are discussed and created then they never get done. It is essential that the solutions that are resolved in your incident imaging exercise be assigned to someone then followed up to ensure that the solutions are implemented. Saying "someone should do something about this!" without assigning the "someone" to the task is almost certainly making it clear than no one will do anything about it.

So what are you waiting for? Start today. At your next safety meeting try it out. You will find that groups of your staff working on real issues will engage one another in safety.

Adapted from "Creating and Maintaining a Practical Based Safety Culture©"

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