



5-minute safety talk

Incident Investigation — Investigate to Find Facts, Not Faults

A cut hand, a forklift collision, a chemical spill, even a near miss — no one likes it when an incident occurs on the job. But when something goes wrong, it is in everyone's best interest to determine exactly what happened and why. Investigations should be conducted not only to discover the cause of the incident, but also to help prevent future incidents of the same kind from occurring.

Unless everyone keeps an open mind, the investigation may not reveal the incident's true cause. Objectivity is a necessary part of a successful investigation. Everyone in the organization, regardless of their position, needs to be taught the importance of being objective. If this does not happen, people may focus on uncovering fault rather than the facts, leaving the true cause undiscovered.

That root cause may be more complicated than you suspect. From time to time an employee may break the rules, directly resulting in an injury, but the cause is more likely a combination of employee, management, equipment, and environmental factors.

Let's say you receive a shock from an electric drill. The easiest (and incorrect) assumption is that the incident is purely your fault. But what if you used that drill yesterday and got a mild shock but did not report it? What if you did report it and your supervisor decided to hand it out again anyway? What if the next employee to use the drill had to work in a damp environment? Management, employees, equipment, and environment have all combined to create the incident.

What supervisors can do

Supervisors play a key role in any investigation involving your area. Supervisors know the investigation procedures, but they also should know the people and equipment involved.

Everyone must work together to successfully investigate an incident.

That can mean something different at each company, of course, but there are general guidelines. The best investigations are done by supervisors that are not quick to jump to a conclusion, adhere by written procedures, use proper paperwork, and can obtain truthful and complete answers from their employees. Root cause analysis tools, such as the *NSC Guide for Identifying Causal Factors & Corrective Actions*, are also available to provide help.

This last point can be a sensitive issue if employees feel that telling the truth could get a co-worker in trouble. It is a good idea to have a strict no-fault policy so employees feel comfortable reporting injury information instead of fearing the consequences of telling the truth.

Follow these steps

While many steps of an investigation are overseen by a supervisor, it is important that employees understand the process, and that they may potentially be involved. The National Safety Council recommends the following steps to ensure a best-practice investigation:

- **Respond to the emergency.** See that any injured person receives medical attention. Secure the area. Use barricades or tape to keep people from changing the scene in any way. Shut down involved equipment, including locking/tagging it out.
- **Identify potential witnesses.** Find out whether any employees saw, heard, or smelled anything that may explain the incident.
- **Collect evidence and record data.** Supervisors and investigators will rely on a pre-assembled investigation kit that includes a camera, film, flashlights, and sampling

equipment. Know who is responsible for maintaining the "go-bag" at your company.

- **Conduct interviews.** Talk to each employee separately, focusing on the who, what, when, where, why, and how of the incident. Ask open-ended questions and write down each response. It may be beneficial to have the employee read the supervisor's notes before leaving so they can either accept them or provide additional information.
- **Review all data.** Study all relevant reports involving equipment maintenance, housekeeping, work permits, and similar incidents. For example, an incident may have been caused by equipment acting up on a previous shift.
- **Prepare the investigation report.** Record only facts, not your opinions.
- **Implement corrective action.** Follow your company's protocol for making necessary changes to prevent future incidents.
- **Follow up.** Check back to make sure that appropriate remedies are in place and working as intended.

Finally, be prepared that you might not always like the investigation's outcome. Safety is the ultimate goal. You may find out that you need to do something differently, and changes should then be made. Investigation findings should help prevent future incidents, and they should never be ignored.

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