

DOAS Loss Control Bulletin

January 2010

Topic of the Month... Accident Investigation

Good accident/incident investigation must be an essential part of any safety program.

The unexpected actions of people, equipment, supplies, or surroundings cause most accidents. Accident investigations determine how and why these unexpected actions occur. They should be conducted with accident prevention in mind, not to place blame. A detailed investigation of most accidents will normally reveal two causes of accidents: surface causes and root causes.

- **Surface causes** are the hazardous conditions or unsafe work practices that directly or indirectly contribute to the accident.
- **Root causes** are the system weaknesses or failures (policies/procedures/practices) that allow the existence of hazardous conditions and unsafe work practices.

An employee slips and falls due to oil on the floor; the oil is the surface cause. The root cause may be a leaky forklift hydraulic line due to lack of maintenance. The key word here is "Details." A good investigator will gather as many details as possible, as soon as safely possible. You want to record your details before something changes or gets moved.



Priorities for incident investigation:

- The first concern is the **injured party**. If they need extrication from a piece of equipment, do not be concerned about saving "evidence". Get the person out and then to treatment. Report the injury according to your agency's procedures.
- Second, **secure** the accident scene. The area should remain intact until the investigation is complete. Keep other employees and/or spectators away from the area, especially if there is blood or other bodily fluids.
- Identify any **witnesses**. Even if what they saw was minimal, take their statement. Many witnesses think they didn't see much, but when all statements are assembled the puzzle comes together. Obtain statements immediately. Don't wait until the end of the shift! Witnesses should be kept separated until they write their statement. If witnesses "compare" notes, their observations can be affected, like reporting things they didn't really see. Ask them to give as much detail as possible. Here are some examples of witness statements:

1. "Jimmy was standing on the catwalk and he slipped and fell and broke his leg."
2. "Jimmy was standing on the catwalk when the main hydraulic line broke and sprayed oil all over his legs and the catwalk. When he tried to jump out of the way, because his shoes were wet with oil, it caused him to slip and fall and break his leg."
3. "Jimmy was standing on the catwalk and was throwing wet paper towels at his assistant Pete. When Pete threw one back at him, Jimmy stepped over the catwalk rail to get out of the way and stepped on a hydraulic line. When the hydraulic line broke, it caused Jimmy to fall and break his leg."



You can see there are three clear differences. #1 kind of goes nowhere, it is very basic; #2 is able to show no fault of the employee; and #3 shows the employee was clearly at fault due to his horseplay. It is these kinds of details that can have a big impact on an investigation.

- **Document**. If you can get access to a camera, now is a good time to take pictures. The first two should both be at different angles and from a distance of about 20 to 30 feet away and then come in for detailed photos. It is better to have too many than not enough. Determine the chain of events that lead to the incident. Determine the "Root Cause". Complete the report write up.

THE PAYOFF - developing "Corrective Actions" that will prevent future similar incidents. Communicate your findings to your entire organization. In this day and age there is simply no reason to repeat the same mistakes.



Thanks for your time. Let's work together to make Georgia a safer place to work.