

March 2020

By: Brett Wardle

Incident Investigation: Find Facts, Not Faults

Editor: Emily Hanson

Intermountain Power Service Corporation

Supervising Safety Newsletter

A cut on the hand, a forklift collision, even a near miss – no one likes it when an incident occurs on the job. When something goes wrong, it is in everyone’s best interest to determine exactly what happened and why. Investigations should be conducted to discover the cause of the incident, learn lessons, and to help prevent future incidents from occurring. Everyone in the organization, regardless of position, needs to be taught the importance of being objective and keeping an open mind. If this does not happen, people may focus on uncovering fault rather than facts, leaving the true cause undiscovered.

The root cause of an incident may be more complicated than suspected. It is important to follow a process to determine the root cause and not jump to conclusions based on incomplete information. Root causes can be a combination of factors relating to employees, management, equipment, or environment. It is important to remember not to focus on one thing during an investigation. All factors need to be looked at and taken into consideration. By performing a thorough, non partial investigation we can determine the true root cause of the incident.

For example, an employee is walking through the work area and trips on an obstruction. The easiest (and incorrect) assumption is that the incident was caused by the person not looking where he or she was walking. The true root causes are related to the safety systems and could point to the process for reporting observed hazards, routine inspections to identify and eliminate hazards, or maintenance of walking-working surfaces. Only a thorough incident investigation will reveal the root causes that will lead to the most appropriate corrective measures.

Follow These Steps

Although many steps of an incident 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.** Ensure any injured person receives medical attention.
- **Secure the area.** Use barricades or tape to keep people from altering the scene in any way. Shut down all equipment involved, including locking and tagging it out, if necessary.
- **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.
- **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.
- **Review all data.** Study all relevant reports involving equipment maintenance, housekeeping, work permits and similar incidents.
- **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 to make sure appropriate remedies are in place and working.

Finally, understand that you may not always like the investigation’s outcome. Safety is the ultimate goal. You may find that you need to do something differently and make changes. Investigation findings should help prevent future incidents and never be ignored.

5 minute Safety Talk by the National Safety Council (NSC). www.nsc.org

Root Cause Analysis Basics

