



Near Misses: Identify and Eliminate Hazardous Workplace Conditions with Proper Training

Seventy-five percent of all accidents are preceded by one or more near misses, according to the National Safety Council.

BY STUART NAKUTIN

In other words, close calls should be wake-up calls for employees and employers to realize that something is wrong and needs to be corrected.

Employees may not realize they are expected to report near misses—no matter how trivial they may seem. Although there may not have been a serious outcome, these incidents could result in future accidents. By recognizing near misses and taking action to correct the underlying problems, employees will not only reduce the number of near misses, but more importantly, they will reduce the number of actual accidents in the future.

NEAR MISS EXAMPLES

“Near misses” can be defined as minor accidents or close calls that have the potential for property loss or injury. A near miss will prevent a task from being completed as planned. Most accidents can be predicted by close calls. These are accidents that almost happened or possibly did happen but simply didn’t result in an injury this time around. Here are some examples of near misses in the workplace:

- An employee trips over an extension cord that lies across the floor but avoids a fall by grabbing the corner of a desk.
- An outward-opening door nearly hits a worker who jumps back just in time to avoid a mishap.
- Instead of using a ladder, an employee puts a box on top of a drum, loses balance and stumbles to the ground. Although the employee is shaken, there is no injury.

When incidents like these happen, most workers are simply relieved they were not injured and then forget about what happened moments later. However, when employees narrowly avoid an accident or injury, everyone should assume they are at risk of that same avoidance. Another person, possibly the employee with the close call, is very likely to be injured by that very same hazard on a future date. In fact, the difference between a near miss and a serious injury is often a fraction of an inch or a split second of time. They are red flags waving at employees to let them know something is very wrong or unsafe and requires immediate attention.

DEALING WITH “NEAR MISSES”

Here is a list of questions for employers and employees to ask themselves when a near miss occurs:

- How do you handle these incidents in your workplace?
- What's your attitude toward a near miss?
- Do you feel momentarily relieved that what happened wasn't any worse?
- Do you just return to your routine after the near miss occurs?
- Do you simply tell yourself that you should be more careful next time?
- Do you have a plan for preventing a repeat performance?

A close call is a call to action. What a person does about these warnings can make all the difference between future injuries and a zero-accidents safety record. Employees need to seize the moment and use the close call as a training opportunity to prevent the imminent accident.

REMOVE HAZARDS

Hazards should be removed as soon as possible, but they still should be reported to supervisors so they can make note of it—even after the hazard has been removed. By discussing these near misses and hazards, it can raise awareness for employees to look out for other hazards that should be reported to a supervisor.

Damaged equipment and property should also immediately be reported to a supervisor. Examples of damaged equipment might include fractured hand tools, power tools that give a shock, machine guards that don't fit or work properly, forklifts with damaged parking brakes, ladders with broken rungs and worn PPE. Examples of damaged property might include crumbling stairs, loose handrails, loose plates in the floor, holes in the floor, loose hinges on the door and broken sidewalks. While some of these examples may not seem important or particularly hazardous, it's important to note that employers and employees need to be aware of these hazards, as well.

CONDUCT “NEAR MISS” TRAINING SESSIONS

When an unfortunate near miss occurs, call a safety meeting to discuss what actually happened, what could have happened, and ways to ensure it doesn't happen again. This may be the perfect opportunity to conduct a full-scale training session on near misses in general and what employees should be looking out for in a particular environment. It is also a chance for an employer to hear firsthand from an employee what he or she thinks are safety hazards within the workplace. Opening up a discussion with the topic of safety at the center is a chance for employees and employers to share

ideas, tips and concerns. It's only an advantage for an employer to develop a preventative—not reactive—safety program. The warning signs of near misses should never be neglected or ignored; employees and employers understanding what happened will reduce or control any future hazards.

The near miss session could begin with the trainer sharing his or her own experiences with close calls, which could prompt the trainees to give close call examples of their own, as well as examples on how to prevent near misses. This will heighten awareness of the safety hazards illustrated by the near misses and will encourage employees to take action to correct those underlying problems. Trainees will begin to understand and learn that they will not be lucky enough to avoid these accidents every time. It's important for employees to discuss examples of near misses to really grasp the importance of the issue. The discussion should then turn to the causes of near misses and then end with corrective action. It's important for these meetings to end with a discussion of proactive measures that need to be taken against near misses.

Here is a list of questions for employers and employees to discuss when talking about near misses that actually occurred in the workplace:

- Was the worker using unsafe practices?
- Was the worker careless because the tasks were too repetitious?
- Was the work violating safety practices?
- Were conditions unsafe?
- Did the worker have proper lighting?
- Was the worker taking shortcuts?
- Is the worker accident-prone?
- Was the “near” victim authorized to be in that work area?

ENCOURAGE ALL EMPLOYEES TO IDENTIFY AND REPORT “NEAR MISSES”

The problem with near misses is that employees often do not know they happened, which makes it very difficult to fix them or prevent future ones. Similarly, one employee may report a near miss to a supervisor, but the rest of the staff will not be made aware of the situation. All too often, these incidents are not reported at all. Many employees simply say, “Whew! That was a close one!” and move on to their next task. They go back to work without mentioning the incident to their supervisor, as if the incident was a one-time occurrence and not worth mentioning or reporting. Employees sometimes decide if nobody gets hurt and there is no damage, then it's not really an accident, but this is a part of the problem. All near misses need to be reported and discussed with a supervisor.

Unfortunately, there are countless work environments where this mentality can be found on a daily basis. If this sounds all too familiar, then this is the first thing that needs to change in the workplace. Even before near misses occur, employers should discuss the importance of reporting near misses to create the best—and safest—work environment. Open discussion between employees and employers is an important aspect of near misses. Encouraging employees to treat close calls exactly the way they treat accidents, which includes reporting them right away, is the crucial first step to finding causes, taking corrective action and training employees to avoid the real accident waiting to happen. ■

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