Accident Investigation

Management support of every part of a safety program is the key to success. Accident investigation is no exception. Managers should review every accident investigation report and take action when necessary. This may result in additional fact finding, it may result in changes that only management has the authority to make, or it may result simply in acknowledgment of a supervisor's good effort. In any case, supervisors and workers will be more likely to accept that management has a genuine interest in their safety when they see them review all accident investigations and act on them as needed.

The following questions and answers address some of the most common concerns about conducting effective accident investigations.

Why investigate accidents?

Accident investigation has one primary goal: to prevent recurrence. It can also help in auditing the effectiveness of your overall safety program and recognizing system problems that could be rectified, and thereby, prevent other injuries that may have the same basic cause or influencing factors. Employees may sometimes be fearful or suspicious about why an accident investigation is being done, believing that the purpose of the investigation is to place blame. It is important for management to educate workers about the benefits of accident investigation and to communicate that the true objective is to make the workplace safer for everyone.

Which accidents should be investigated?

Ideally, all accidents should be investigated. Every accident that occurs provides an opportunity for management to discover new ways of improving safety conditions. When possible, you should also investigate any "near misses" - incidents that did not result in injury or property damage, but which had the potential to be very costly.

When should an accident be investigated?

Accidents should be investigated as soon as possible after they occur. Investigate while the facts are still clear in people's minds and interest is high in instituting corrective measures. Prompt investigation reflects management's concern for workers.

Who should make the investigation?

The supervisor of the area or department should make the initial investigation. The supervisor is in the best position to find out what happened and make any immediate changes that are needed. Ultimate responsibility for taking action rests with company's management.

How should we conduct an accident investigation?

It is important to institute a systematic method for investigating accidents. You should avoid the temptation to quickly assign a cause and adopt controls before uncovering all the relevant facts. There are four steps involved in good accident investigation:

1. Immediate response,
2. Investigate to get the facts,
3. Analysis of the facts to determine the causes, and
4. Development of specific corrective actions.

1. Immediate Response

Employees should notify their supervisor as soon as an accident or injury occurs. The supervisor's first responsibility is to see that proper medical treatment or first aid is provided to any injured persons. Your company should have an established procedure regarding this.

Another immediate responsibility of the supervisor is to see that any obvious hazards are immediately eliminated. In terms of accident investigation, immediate response gives the investigator a chance to get a general overview of the facts related to the accident. This is also the time to secure the area and preserve evidence.

2. Investigate to Get the Facts

Once the immediate response has been completed, a more complete on-site accident investigation should be conducted. This should be done as soon as possible while memories are fresh and before conditions have changed.

The primary goal should be to gather as many objective facts as possible about who, what, where, when, why, and how the accident happened. This can best be done by talking to the injured persons and witnesses, checking relevant records, examining the materials and equipment involved, and taking photos of physical conditions.

When conducting interviews, remember to look for *facts*, not *fault*. Ask non-leading questions and beware of smoke screens. Try to interview the witnesses privately.

3. Analysis of the Facts to Determine the Causes

After determining *how* the accident happened, you must then find out *why* it occurred. This is necessary for developing an effective plan of action for control. Accidents rarely happen from a single, simple cause such as "unsafe action" or "lack of a guard" or "not trained." Rather, accident occurrence is a complex matter, in which the "real" causes often include a combination of unsafe physical conditions, unsafe actions, inadequate administrative procedures, and other factors. Try to pin down as many contributing causes as possible.

In the event that the accident was a back strain or other musculoskeletal disorder, it is important to recognize that a single act or event may have triggered symptoms, but that other elements of the job may have had a cumulative effect.

Development of specific corrective actions

The main reason for investigating accidents is to prevent the recurrence of similar accidents in the future. The desired result of effective accident investigation is implementation of specific corrective actions. For your company, this means developing good corrective recommendations and then following through with top management to see that the appropriate measures are implemented.

The plan of action developed should contain various physical and administrative control strategies addressing the multiple causes uncovered through initial fact finding and analysis. Recommendations may include physical changes, procedural modifications, training sessions, safety program reforms, personnel improvements, and environmental changes.

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