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ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION

Job site accidents do not happen in a vacuum. There is a reason, or more accurately *reasons*, for every accident. The five (5) W's must be answered by the accident investigator: Who; What; Why; When; and Where. The purpose of Accident Investigation is to prevent the same type of accident from reoccurring.

Apparently simple accidents may actually be caused by many complex and overlapping reasons. For example, a worker accidentally drops a hammer from a ladder and it strikes a co-worker who is holding (securing) the ladder. The co-worker is not wearing a hard hat. Certainly, the initial finding would blame the co-worker for not wearing a hard hat. Case closed. Wrong!

In the above scenario, why was the co-worker not wearing a hard hat? Were they available? Was it company policy to wear hard hats? Was this policy enforced? Had this violation of safety procedure been overlooked by supervisors to the point where it became standard operating procedure? Were shortcuts taken because someone put a higher premium on production than on safety? Why did the hammer fall in the first place? Did the hammer have a proper grip or was it extremely cold and the worker had no gloves? If so, were warm, non-slip gloves available? Could engineering controls (a net) or changes in procedure be devised to prevent the reoccurrence of this accident and like accidents? (Objects falling from above.)

To get the answer to these and other questions, as soon as possible, statements should be taken from all witnesses to an accident. All relevant factors should be considered. Was the accident preventable by a change in work methods? (Physically securing the ladder.) Was the accident preventable through redesign of the hammer? (A non-slip handle.) Was the accident preventable by increased safety training? (Emphasis on the reasons for, and the requirement to, wear hard hats.) Was the accident preventable through stronger management supervision? (Not letting slipshod safety practices become standard operating procedures.)

The primary focus of an accident investigation, after gathering all the facts, is to determine how to prevent the accident from reoccurring. It is not to find fault with any particular individual. However, the results of an accident investigation may indicate that additional safety training is necessary.

It is easy to overlook near-miss accidents (a hammer drops and no one is hit) or minor accidents such as a worker falling off a ladder and not getting hurt at all. This is a mistake because near-miss and minor accidents have the same causes as serious accidents and each time they reoccur, it is just a matter of luck whether or not an injury develops.