



## Accident Investigation Safety Meeting Guidelines

### Meeting Objectives

To explain the accident investigation process and the important role that thorough accident investigation plays in accident prevention. The result should be improved reporting of all accidents and incidents, greater cooperation with investigations, and better understanding of how to use the process to identify and correct workplace risks and reduce the potential for accidents.

### Suggested Materials to Have on Hand

- Accident investigation forms

### Introduction/Overview

One of the best ways to prevent accidents is to investigate the causes of the accidents that do occur. A prompt, thorough investigation of any incident, large or small, including near-misses, is an important part of any good safety program.

In some ways, a good investigation of a workplace accident resembles a police investigation of a crime. We try to get in and check the scene before anything has been moved or changed, and we try to assemble the evidence and interview the witnesses while the experience is still fresh in their minds.

There is, however, one big difference between a workplace accident investigation and a police crime investigation. We're not looking for a criminal and we're not trying to blame the accident on anyone. What we are doing is finding out what happened, why it happened, and how we can prevent another similar accident from occurring.

Investigate all accidents and near-misses, not just the incidents where people get injured and which have to be reported to OSHA. Near-misses are warnings that help us identify problems and patterns that can lead to more serious accidents. By following through on the causes of near-misses, we can make changes or corrections that will prevent injuries, illnesses, or damage to equipment.

They say that every cloud has a silver lining—meaning something good can come out of things that are bad. When it comes to on-the-job accidents, thorough investigations are that silver lining. They enable us to look closely at every detail that contributed to an accident or near-miss. What we learn from the investigation helps us identify and correct problems, and makes our workplace safer and healthier.

We can't do a good job of investigating accidents without your participation and cooperation. That's why I'm reviewing our procedures today. We want you to understand the "how" and "why" of those procedures so that you'll report problems and help us uncover accident causes and reduce the chance that any of us will be injured or endangered on the job.

You have two key roles to play in our accident-investigation procedures.

1. Always report any accident or near-miss immediately so we can look into it and make the needed corrections.
2. Cooperate with all investigations of any accident in which you were involved, which you witnessed, or where your knowledge of the situation or procedure could be helpful.

Remember, when we investigate an accident, we're not looking for someone to blame. We're trying to find out what really happened and what to do to prevent the same thing from happening again. So your cooperation can really make a difference—even a life-or-death difference—to all of us.

## General Hazards

You all know that safety training is designed to help you identify hazards on the job and protect yourselves from them. Accident investigation has the same purpose. Any workplace—in fact, any place at all—has countless potential hazards. By recognizing where risk lies, and knowing how to eliminate or reduce it, we make our workplace hazards a lot less likely to become hazardous to our safety or health.

As I said earlier, it's important to investigate all accidents and near-misses. What do I mean by a near-miss? Just about anything that makes you say "whew, that was close." If you slip on spilled liquid but don't fall, that's a near-miss. It's a near-miss if a box falls off a high shelf but doesn't hit anyone. If your sleeve catches in a machine but you get it out without getting hurt, that's a near miss, too.

Important as near-misses are, we have to investigate accidents in the order of their seriousness. Obviously, an accident that causes a death is the first order of priority. After that, the order of seriousness is accidents that result in:

- Days away from work
- Restricted ability to work
- Medical treatment
- First aid treatment
- Near-misses

I want to emphasize that this doesn't mean that we only investigate a near-miss if we get around to it. It's just that if there is more than one incident to investigate, we turn first to the one that's most serious in terms of the list.

## Identifying Hazards

A good accident investigation is aimed at discovering what happened, what caused it to happen, and why, and how to prevent future occurrences. The investigation tries to identify the hazards that led to the accident and any other related hazards that could lead to accidents in the future.

An accident investigation, as I mentioned, should take place as quickly as possible after the incident itself. The investigator or investigators approach it like a good detective or investigative journalist, trying to answer these questions:

- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Who was involved?
- How did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- How can we keep it from happening again?

To get complete answers to these questions, it's best to investigate immediately after an accident. Often, more than one factor contributes to an accident, so we want to be thorough and not miss anything that could be important.

When there's an accident, the first thing you do, of course, is to make sure that anyone who's injured or ill gets proper medical treatment. If there's something like a spill or leak, it has to be stopped before it spreads. In some cases, we may have to barricade or rope off an accident site to keep people from harm and to preserve the evidence.

But aside from taking necessary actions like these, it's best to leave the accident scene untouched so you can study the evidence. If, for instance, there was a spill, you would want to check the evidence to find out what spilled, where it spilled from and where it went. If a machine was involved, you want to be able to check the settings and materials in the area and whatever else might be relevant.

In a more serious accident, we might have to take measurements of the area or even take photos or videos of the accident scene to be studied later.

## Interviewing Witnesses

Another thing we do early in the investigation is to interview people who were present when the incident occurred or who know something useful about the operation, machine, substance, etc. in question.

Usually, witnesses are interviewed one at a time right after the incident, often at or near the place where it happened so they can point out or show what they're talking about. We try to get eyewitness reports right away in order to get immediate impressions of what happened before an eyewitness has a chance to confuse it with other similar incidents or with what other people say.

These interviews are not intended to put anyone on trial or to find someone to blame. They're strictly for the purpose of getting as many facts and as much information on what happened as possible. You may be asked to describe what you saw or heard or experienced. You may even be asked to act out how it happened—without, of course, repeating the accident itself.

You also may be asked what you think caused the problem and how you think we could prevent something similar from happening in the future.

Part of the fact-gathering will also involve the specific information that's required for filling out reports. Again, we're after facts here—not opinions. The forms ask the details of some of the questions I discussed before, such as:

- What time did the incident occur?
- Exactly where did it occur (for instance, at the X machine on the east end of Room Y)?
- Who was injured or made ill and what was the type and severity of the injury or illness?
- How did the accident occur? What were the people involved doing before it happened? What materials or machinery or substances were involved or in the area? What led up to the accident, and what exactly happened during the accident itself? The answers to these questions will usually involve a sequence of events.

For example, a worker turned on a saw, put in a piece of wood, a blade broke, and pieces of wood flew out and injured a worker at the next machine.

- What task was an injured person performing and was that his or her regular job?
- What actions were taken after the accident?
- Who witnessed the accident and what were they doing?

## Protection Against Hazards

Since the purpose of accident investigation is accident prevention, getting the facts is just the beginning. You have to use the facts to find out why the accident happened and then what can be done to prevent future accidents.

This can be easier said than done. Many accidents have more than one cause. And sometimes what seem to be causes are actually symptoms of the real problem. Just like sneezing is a symptom, rather than the cause, of a cold, an unsafe act that led to an accident may be a symptom of inadequate training. Or an accident that appears to be caused by a missing machine guard may actually be caused by a machine that's not working properly or by poor machine design or workplace layout that led someone to remove the guard. In cases like these, we have to deal with the symptoms and the underlying causes.

In addition, when we keep track of all accidents and their causes, we can often identify patterns. We may find that specific materials, machines, or jobs are involved in accidents again and again.

If a number of people injure their backs lifting boxes, we may need more specialized training on how to lift properly and/or more material handling equipment to reduce the need for manual lifting and/or boxes of a different size or shape that are easier to handle.

If we have several near-misses involving spills from similar containers, we'd consider switching to a safer kind of container or finding a new way to remove liquids from those containers.

You can make important contributions to helping us find out the "why" of accidents and what we can do to correct problems that cause accidents. Our most valuable resource is people who know the jobs, equipment, substances, etc. best. And that's you. You may have been making corrections as you go along on a piece of equipment or a task without thinking about why you do it or that other people might not have the experience to make those same corrections. You may be aware that some equipment isn't being maintained on a regular basis. Or you may have noticed that a particular type of protective clothing has a tendency to rip or tear.

If you notice a problem in the course of your work, please report it to me—along with any suggestions you have for changes and improvements. And if there is an accident or near-miss involving materials, equipment, or tasks where you have noticed problems, please report what you've observed and why you think there have been problems.

The more input we have from everyone, the better. With complete information, we can do a good analysis of our potential hazards and develop ways to make our workplace safer.

## **Safety Procedures**

That gets back to my earlier point about your roles in accident investigation. It's essential to report any accident or near-miss immediately. Small, seemingly minor incidents should send up a warning flag that something is wrong, whether it's in the way a job is performed or in the materials and equipment used to perform the job, or both. We don't want to miss those warnings, because they allow us to fix small problems before they become big ones.

Don't brush off any incident as too minor to bother with. Report it immediately, along with all the facts you have on what did happen or could have happened. Be sure to make your reports promptly even if no one was hurt. Remember, the longer you wait, the colder the evidence trail gets.

No matter who reports an incident or how serious an incident was, if it involves you or a job you perform, we need your help. If you were involved or were a witness, we need your clear, objective report on what happened. If you are familiar with the incident's task, materials or equipment, we need your experience and knowledge. Think about what could have been done to prevent the incident and what changes we could make to prevent future incidents.

It can take a while to complete a report on an accident and an analysis of what happened and why. But once that's done, we're ready to move on to the final and most important stage: correcting the problem.

We need your cooperation here, too. Not only can you help advise us on corrections and changes, you play an important role in making those changes work. If an accident is very serious, or is part of a pattern of similar accidents, we may have to make a whole series of changes in order to improve the safety of our workplace.

If, for instance, we have an abundance of slips and falls in one particular area, we might decide to reorganize our storage areas, increase our attention to housekeeping, provide training on proper lifting and carrying, improve the lighting, etc.

If we have an accident that badly injured a forklift driver, we might provide refresher training for the drivers and others who need to know about staying off forklifts, post added traffic signs in the plant, reorganize the work area to provide the drivers with straighter routes, change the way we assemble pallets to make them more balanced when they're on the trucks, etc.

But the changes will only improve health and safety if everyone buys into them and takes them seriously. We need your help not only to investigate accidents but to take the corrective actions that will prevent future accidents.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions**

1. Why do we say that accident investigation is an important form of accident prevention?
2. What is the key rule of accident reporting?
3. Why is it important to report and investigate near-misses?
4. Why is it important to interview all witnesses—and to do it as quickly as possible after an incident?
5. What are some of the questions an accident investigator asks?
6. How are criminal investigations and accident investigations similar—and different?
7. What are some safety improvements we've made here as a result of investigating accidents and near-misses?
8. What are OSHA's requirements regarding accident reporting?
9. Can you think of any areas where we've had a pattern of accidents and near-misses?
10. Are there any other questions?

### **Wrap-Up**

We all want to avoid accidents and do our jobs efficiently without injuries or illnesses. But accidents do happen, and when they do, we have a responsibility to do more than just report them immediately in compliance with OSHA regulations.

We also have a responsibility to investigate accidents, and near-misses, promptly and thoroughly. We have to look at every detail so we can figure out exactly what happened and identify all the factors that contributed to the problem. We can only do that if we have the full cooperation of everyone who was present during the incident and everyone with any knowledge that could help us conduct a thorough investigation of what occurred and why it occurred.

I want to emphasize one more time that the purpose of accident investigation is not to find someone to blame. The purpose is to understand where our problems lie, and fix them. Complete investigation of all incidents is one of our best safety tools. We have to treat near-misses as warnings, look carefully at the "hows" and "whys" of each incident, and get input from everyone with useful knowledge.

Then we take everything we've learned and take action to prevent injuries and illness and to make our workplace safer and more efficient.