

Risky Business

Teaching employees to break the cycle of at-risk behavior begins with the business owner

By Gary A. Higbee EMBA CSP

When an employee is injured or experiences a near miss, perhaps you have asked yourself: Why did he do that? What was he thinking?

Or maybe you have wondered why you did something you wished you hadn't. We all take risks. Even as a safety professional, it wasn't until a few years ago that I began to understand risk and why people take it.

Learning to recognize risk should be a part of every business owners' safety program. It allows you or co-workers to intervene and prevent potential injuries. The list isn't long. Only four errors are responsible for more than 90 percent of all the acute injuries people suffer. They are:

1. Eyes not on task; or moving hands, feet, or body without looking first.
2. Mind not on task.
3. Being in or moving into the line of fire.
4. Losing balance, traction or grip.

State of mind

None of us make these errors on purpose. Our state of mind greatly affects the efficiency and safety of our work. Errors occur when we are in one of four states:

Rushing. This doesn't mean just going fast. It means going faster than normal, which increases the risk of injury significantly. One

example is trying to finish in 10 minutes a job that takes 15 minutes under the best conditions.

Frustration. When things don't go well, emotions run high. The nut won't break loose, so you jerk on the wrench; it slips off, and you scrape your knuckles. Maybe some penetrating oil would have solved the problem, but once frustration sets in, clear thinking is ruled out.

Fatigue. Our society is suffering a sleep deprivation epidemic, but



extended work hours, high exertion, boredom, and a host of other factors also can cause fatigue.

Complacency. We become numb to hazards.

Other states like depression, illness, and panic can take your mind and eyes off the task, but these four are most likely to cause trouble on a day-to-day basis.

Acute injury pattern

Making one of the four basic errors increases the likelihood of injury, no matter where you are or what you are doing. It's fine to tell people to be careful, follow directions, and watch what they're doing, but that doesn't increase safety skills.

So what can business owners do about it? A few basic skill development techniques can help prevent injuries. While they are more effective when taught through a comprehensive course, you can learn a great deal about yourself and your personal safety skills by practicing these techniques, then teaching them to your team.

Self-trigger on the state of mind to prevent or avoid making the error. Many of us do this already. When frustrated, we stop and walk away from the task to regain our composure. But without practice, we may not trigger soon enough or at all. Learning to trigger when in a state of rushing, frustration, or fatigue can prevent us from making one of the four errors that get us hurt. Even when forced to rush, we can use that realization to increase alertness and focus extra hard on the task. This technique works well on the first three critical errors, but has limited effectiveness on complacency.

Analyze close calls and small injuries to prevent big ones. Learning to trigger on the state of mind takes time and practice, so while you're improving your safety skills, don't miss the opportunity to learn from mistakes. Analyze those errors and close calls to see what states were involved. If it wasn't a state, maybe a habit needs changing.

Observe others for state-to-error patterns. Here is where we find

the most help with complacency. For example, when we see people driving erratically while trying to read a map or use a cell phone, we know something serious could happen. Avoiding them may be the best defense against injury. The driver is obviously very complacent.

Notice and intervene

It's always easier to spot the state-to-error pattern in co-workers, family, and friends. Noticing it creates a great opportunity to intervene before someone is injured, and it helps avoid complacency.

Changing habits and improving personal safety skills takes work. One thing business owners should stress to employees and do themselves is to look before moving and check the footing. Moving your eyes before you move your body (or car) is the best defense against injury.

Recognizing at-risk patterns helps you defuse those situations. As you practice, you will become more aware of these patterns in yourself. Try it, and see how the risk of injury at work or at home can be significantly reduced.

Gary Higbee founded Higbee & Associates Inc., a full-service safety training and consulting firm in Johnston, Iowa. He also is the Senior U.S. Safety Consultant for SafeStart and SafeTrack North America. For information on SafeStart, call 515/270-6623 or visit www.higbeeandassociates.com. ■

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