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SUPERVISING ACCIDENT REPEATERS

By SeaBright Insurance Loss Control

A majority of workers will go their entire working lives without suffering a work related injury. However, there are others who are injured several times a year. These accident “repeaters” cost their employers a disproportionate amount of time & money as compared to the percentage they represent in the work force.

Accident repetition is a problem you as a supervisor must address immediately. Why the urgency? An accident “repeater” indicates the existence of a problem. Perhaps the root causes of the incidents are not being identified or corrected. All too often, after a serious injury occurs, the worker’s claim history is reviewed and a pattern of small injuries preceding the big loss can be clearly seen.

Individuals are not “accident prone” or “accidents waiting to happen.” Accidents are not “pre-destined” to occur. They are caused by unsafe behaviors or unsafe conditions. However, these unsafe conditions are often brought about by unsafe behavior. This behavior may be the result of numerous factors, including the mental state of the worker, as well as physical conditions.

Contributing Factors

Personal events in one’s life can create great emotional stress and distractions that contribute to accidents. As a supervisor, you must be on the alert and recognize that employees experiencing such events may be at increased risk of injury. Examples of contributing factors are:

- Marital difficulties, including divorce or separation
- Death or illness of a family member or friend
- Financial problems
- Squabbles with children, relatives or neighbors
- Changes of residence or living conditions
- Violations of the law
- Health problems

The supervisor can do little about these factors directly. Moral support will help, but the biggest task will be to watch over the worker closely during stressful periods, possibly reassigning the worker to less hazardous tasks.

However, life stressors cannot be blamed for all cases. In fact in most cases the contributing factors are items you have the responsibility and authority to control. These include:

- The injured employee's lack of knowledge
- Inadequate safety training
- Unsafe work practices
- Unsafe work conditions
- Inadequate supervision
- Intentional safety policy violations or safety "shortcuts"
- Employee not suited for the job

These are root cause issues that must be dealt with directly. If there are root cause problems, it is likely that other workers are susceptible to injury also. If your investigation determines that the problem resides with the injured worker, you must work with them one-on-one to assure the employee understands the job procedures, the hazards of the task, the hazard controls, and your expectations going forward. Your discussions with the injured worker may be very enlightening.

Identification and Counseling for "Repeaters"

Identifying employees who repeatedly experience a greater proportion of accidents is a manager and supervisor's responsibility. To assist our clients, SeaBright periodically provides an "Accident Review Form" that lists "repeaters" sorted by social security number and client policy number, regardless of the year of injury, for the entire period the company has been insured by SeaBright. This form may be sent out when a significant repeater is noted (See the sample that follows). Also, each monthly loss run lists every accident repeater who reported a claim to SeaBright in the most current month. The Accident Repeater Report can be found near the back of your monthly SeaBright loss run.

Once identified, it is important to help these people by defining your expectations. A formal counseling session may be warranted between the worker, the supervisor and possibly management, depending on the circumstances. These discussions must be kept confidential. Maintain a positive format focusing on future actions and not past mistakes. Your role is to help the employee avoid further injury.

Open ended questions should be used to gain as much input from the worker as possible in his/her own words, such as, "Joe, what can I do to help you avoid injuries?" or "What additional training do you feel you need to do your job more safely?" Ideally, you may want to obtain the available accident investigation reports as a part of the session, as they should assist in identifying the specific injury causes.

An action plan should be mutually developed and monitored by the supervisor to assure it is being followed. For example: "Eye protection shall be worn when in any productions areas," or "All ladders used by the worker will be tied off."

Remember to show concern over the worker's well being, emphasizing the need to keep him/her as a healthy and productive member of the work force. "Joe, you're one of my best men. I don't want to lose you again or see you injured."

To sum up, Willie Hammer, a noted expert in the field of safety management, states:

It has been pointed out that people are motivated by a tremendous number of factors. They can be motivated to minimize actions that could lead to accidents. Firm supervisory control over personnel can be a definite motivating force. A plant in which it is known that disregard of safety rules will result in disciplinary action will generally be a far safer place than one in which the rules are held lightly. It is for this reason that management support is a necessity. Common examples of disregard for safety include smoking in areas not so designated; failures to wear hard-hats, face shields, goggles, or safety

shoes; blocking fire exits and routes to them; failures to secure ladders properly, and poor housekeeping. Each of these is a flagrant violation, which should not be tolerated. First-line supervisors should be held directly responsible to ensure that all personnel under their supervision maintain safe working habits and observe stipulated rules.

In some instances workers may unknowingly be conducting themselves in ways that are unsafe. This is often the case with newly employed or inexperienced workers. Some newly employed workers may disregard established procedures to do things the way they did them where they were previously employed. Inexperienced workers may just lack knowledge of safe conduct. Both of these types of employees must be checked frequently and carefully by the supervisor until he or she is certain that they have safe work habits. Then, as for all workers, the supervisor should check their operations, the machines and controls they use, their clothing, working conditions, and their safety equipment periodically to ensure they have maintained their good habits.¹

Accident Prevention Objectives

Whatever the contributing factors are, you as a supervisor need to keep in mind the objectives of an accident prevention program. The objectives are:

- Reduced pain and suffering
- Improved morale
- Increased safety awareness
- Decreased accident frequency and severity
- Returning injured workers to work as soon as possible
- Reduced accident costs - both direct and indirect

Meeting these objectives results in a win-win situation for the workers and management. Increased productivity and profits should be achieved as fewer employees are injured.

¹ Willie Hammer, Occupational Safety Management and Engineering, Third Edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. Publisher, 1976.)