



TDCJ Risk Management's
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IT'S NOT YOUR FAULT, OR IS IT?



An employee is working to meet a report deadline. While retrieving documents from the top drawer of the filing cabinet, the cabinet tips over falling on the employee and injuring them. The employee misses the next three weeks of work due to a resulting back injury. This was an unsafe condition, right?

The Investigation

The investigation into this injury revealed that the top drawer of the filing cabinet contained most of the files stored in the cabinet. The bottom drawer was not utilized because it broke a few months earlier. After it broke, the files from this drawer were redistributed to other drawers within the same filing cabinet. A request to replace the filing cabinet had already been submitted and approved. The new filing cabinet was scheduled to arrive the following week. It

was determined that the weight of the top drawer when it was fully extended caused the filing cabinet to become unstable and ultimately topple over.

So, is this still an unsafe condition or is it now an unsafe act by the employee?

The broken filing cabinet created an unsafe condition. That's factual. However, the employee's action of redistributing the files in the same cabinet substantially contributed to the unsafe condition. This too is factual. Had the employee not redistributed the files within the same cabinet, this incident might have been prevented. That's plausible, but not factual. The incident could have been prevented had the employee removed all files and discontinued use of the faulty cabinet. That's factual.

The Outcome

The injury was ultimately ruled to be the result of an unsafe condition. The employee was not aware that the additional weight in the top drawer of the filing cabinet would make the cabinet top-heavy enough to cause it to fall over. To aid in the prevention of future similar incidents, the department head instructed her supervisors to focus on office safety at the next monthly safety meeting. The department head also shared this account with other leadership in effort to possibly prevent their departments from experiencing similar incidents.

“An unexpected, undesirable event. Something occurring unexpectedly and unintentionally.” This is how Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines an accident. But what exactly does ‘occurring unexpectedly’ mean when factor-

ing in the 'human' element? The definition of an accident becomes less apparent and more subjective when a person's actions, or lack of actions, are involved as was the case in the example.

Statistically speaking, accident investigators agree that 90% of all accidents can be traced back to human error. Are we really that unsafe? The numbers say that we are.

Of the employee injuries reported to TDCJ Risk Management in April 2007, 75 injuries were attributed to unsafe conditions while 242 injuries were documented as being unsafe acts. In other words, 76%, or three quarters, of the employee injuries reported during April of this year were the direct result of an unsafe act being performed by the injured party. Arguably, this percentage would even be higher if the unsafe condition could be traced back to its origin.

Unsafe conditions such as wet floors, sharp edges, faulty furniture, etc. can more often than not be attributed to human error. How did the floor get wet? How did the table get a sharp edge? What caused the arm of the chair to break? Another example might involve someone spilling a bottle of water but neglecting to clean it up or place a sign notifying other

staff of the hazardous condition. In these cases, the person's actions might not be intentional but they do create a hazardous condition for others. Therefore, all staff should take a personal initiative to ensure they don't create or ignore unsafe conditions.

What causes accidents?

We've already noted that 9 out of 10 accidents involve human error. There are some common threads that tie a person's perception to their susceptibility to incur injury.



It Won't Happen to Me

Basically, most of us are just thinking about getting the job done and we tend to rationalize the risk of getting injured. We think to ourselves that we have done this job many, many times this way and nothing bad has ever happened. Therefore, nothing bad is going to happen to us this time. On an intellectual level, we realize there is a potential danger but decide the risk of injury is low so we *drive on*. Because we have not been injured so far, we actu-

ally think of ourselves as being pretty safety conscious. We know the right way to do it, we realize that it is hazardous to do it the way we are, but reassure ourselves by thinking "it won't happen to me."

We Take Short Cuts

Some of us are fairly meticulous about following policy, procedure and safe work practices, but because a job "will only take a minute" we use an unsafe method or tool. For example, not putting on safety glasses because the job will only take a minute, or not following escort procedure because this offender has never given you any trouble. Usually, we pause to think about it just before we do something a little unsafe, or maybe quite a bit unsafe. We know better, we know the safe way to do it, but we opt to 'chance it.' In effect we're saying, "There's no way it could happen to me." Maybe it's human nature to think that accidents always happen to someone else, but they can happen to you too! What makes you any different? Why take the chance in the first place? Only you can decide to do your job safely and correctly the first time, every time.

We Rush the Job

Through past reductions in force and ever tightening budget constraints, we have all

learned to do more with less. This often requires working much harder and faster to meet obligations and deadlines. In doing so, we tend to evaluate what it will take to get the job done, skip what we think we can get by without (*usually the safety stuff*), take one last look at the clock and then go to work. This usually works ok until you find yourself working beyond your physical and/or mental capabilities. This is not saying that you're incapable of completing a given task, it's just that everyone has a "speed" at which they optimally perform. As with an automobile, the faster it's driven, the harder it is to control. The same holds true to job performance. If you rush to the point where you're skipping details or throwing caution to the wind, you're increasing your risk of losing control. You become fatigued, inattentive and begin making more mistakes. This substantially raises your odds of having an accident. And since you're already cutting corners on safety, chances are the impending accident is going to be severe.

Accident Prevention

What can you do to prevent an accident? The following are some tips that just might keep you off the injured list.

- * Learn to expect the unexpected.
- * Ask for help.
- * Get a second opinion, is this the safest way to do this?
- * Take heed when that uneasy feeling overcomes you just before you start a questionable task. It could save you from injury.
- * Pay close attention to what you're doing — from start to finish of the job.
- * If you make a mess, clean it up!
- * If you witness an unsafe act/condition, correct it. If you can't, then report it to someone who can.
- * Take responsibility for your own actions.

Nobody ever plans on having an accident — *if they do, they've committed fraud and that's a topic for another training circular*. But, the fact remains that accidents continue to occur. Theoretically, if human error is to blame for 90% of all accidents, then humans have the potential capability to prevent 90% of all accidents. The problem lies

within the fact that we all continue to rush through jobs, we take short cuts and we think since we are safer than others it won't happen to us. As long as we hold onto these mind-sets, accidents will continue to occur and will continue to be our fault, 90% percent of them anyway!

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