

# Disastrous Distractions

## *Paying Attention Pays Off in Workplace Safety*

by Vince Politte

*A safe working environment should be a top priority for every organization. However, all the safety equipment, hard hats and personal protective equipment in the world can't protect workers from outside distractions.*



The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reports that most workplace incidents occur when workers are distracted.<sup>1</sup> Some distractions occur when people simply fail to pay attention to what is going on around them. Others result from a “production mentality,” when doing the job quickly becomes more important than doing the job safely.

### Identify the Distractions

In today's economic climate, it's no surprise that workers feel pressured to increase productivity, improve quality and raise profits. Depending on the type of business and the level of risk management practiced, workers may feel compelled to take shortcuts to meet production deadlines or avoid overtime. The situation is compounded when supervisory personnel feel pressured to meet time demands and pass that stress on to workers. It can become easier and easier for everyone to let safety slide in the interest of meeting deadlines.

It doesn't matter whether the issue is fatigue (from working too many hours) or cutting corners (to get more done in the time allotted), management must uphold the responsibility to model and support safe practices. If supervisory personnel let safety issues slide, it's likely that workers will do the same.

### Improve Safety

To avoid this potentially disastrous decline in safety practices, two fundamentals have to be acted upon:

1. Management and supervisors must renew their commitment to the safety process.
2. Employees must become involved in meaningful safety practices.

When you begin to develop a proactive safety program, these two fundamentals may present a challenge to everyone in your organization, but help is available from many sources.

Your insurance carrier is a good place to begin, or you could contact a consultant who specializes in implementing safety programs. Safety issues have the power to affect everyone in your organization. A successful safety program begins with management and spreads throughout the organization. The following tips can help managers embark on the road to safety:

### Be Committed

It takes more than just saying you are committed to safety—you have to put your words into action. Supervisors can demonstrate their commitment to safety in a number of ways, but first and foremost, they must “walk the walk” and follow the company’s safety rules. Even when deadlines loom, a supervisor must never yield to temptation and take unsafe shortcuts or extend working hours beyond safe limits.

### Be Visible

Visit employees where they work, whether on the shop floor, in the field or in the office. Talk about your concern for the safety of every employee and listen carefully to the responses. Let workers know that you do not condone unsafe practices and will not allow them to remain uncorrected. If unsafe conditions are identified, be sure you take immediate action to address those problems. Remember to follow up in a timely fashion, to assure your employees the situation was resolved.

### Be Vigilant

Maintaining a good safety record is the result of diligent work on everyone’s part. Management must set an example by performing the following:

**Review**—Supervisors must review every report of injury or “near miss.” Doing so demonstrates the importance of providing complete and accurate information.

**Follow up**—Post-incident reports reinforce the concept that safety is a top priority and is taken seriously.

**Take action**—Once a problem has been identified, do whatever is necessary to eliminate the causes of incidents in your organization and keep small problems from growing into big ones. It’s important that the action you take is positive, rather than punitive.

### Be Thorough

Safety goals and objectives should be incorporated throughout the organizational planning process, using an

established budget item that includes safety improvement. Communicate your organization’s safety performance expectations, goals and objectives to all employees, including management. To encourage a sustainable change in the safety culture of your organization, make a point of conducting regular reviews of your organization’s progress.

### Be Involved

Identify areas where employees can become actively involved in the safety process and allow work time for appropriate activities. Employees whose ideas and involvement are valued are more apt to perform safely than employees who are simply following the rules. Creating opportunities for employees to contribute ideas and information can help drive safety improvement. All workers should be encouraged to support safety efforts by:

- reporting unsafe conditions.
- attending safety meetings.
- serving on employee safety committees.
- planning and leading a safety meeting.
- participating in incident investigations and facility walk-throughs.
- presenting ideas to improve safety performance.

### Be a Safety-Focused Organization

It is possible to create a culture within your organization in which injuries are a thing of the past. Everyone should be aware that distraction is a dangerous thing.

Managers at all levels can have a profound effect on their company’s safety efforts by following the suggestions given above. When supervisors and managers take safety seriously, their employees will also be more committed. Nothing energizes an organization’s safety improvement efforts more effectively than employee involvement.

Develop ways to pique employees’ interest by discovering new methods to improve safety. Create motivation for positive change in the organization by believing that it’s possible to have zero injuries in your workplace—and be sure to communicate that belief to employees. Show employees that working safely is relevant to their jobs, careers, paychecks and, most importantly, to their families. These actions can help create an environment in which everyone at every level in the organization works to increase his or her commitment and involvement in making the workplace injury free. The end result? Everyone stays safe and goes home without mishap.

<sup>1</sup> “Revisiting Heinrich’s ‘Accident Triangle,’” Dr. Mike Williamsen, January 31, 2003. Accessed from the Industrial Safety & Hygiene News (ISHN) website on March 28, 2008 [www.ishn.com/Articles](http://www.ishn.com/Articles)