11/17/2025 - ToolBox Talk – Explaining Near Misses

IDENTIFY

Call it a close call or a near miss, we've all had one — probably a lot more than one. They're incidents that almost happened but didn't, or incidents that did happen, but no harm or damage was done.

If you are like many workers, you probably did little more than breathe a sigh of relief and carry on with whatever it was you were doing. Very often, however, such incidents could have been worse and have occurred due to factors that could have been controlled.

It's hard, if not impossible, to control those factors if no one knew about them. The scary part is that the difference between a near miss and an injury, death, or significant property damage can be a split second or a tiny distance.

Taking near misses seriously, which starts with reporting them, is recognized as a good way to anticipate and prevent harmful situations rather than simply reacting after they happen. Remember, nobody gets in trouble for reporting an incident or near miss. Sometimes it's a condition you can fix right away, other times it requires specialized attention.

COMMUNICATE AND CONTROL

So, what, exactly, is a near miss? One widely accepted definition is, "an incident or unsafe condition with potential for injury, equipment damage, or property damage."

Determining whether it should be reported isn't always easy, but even a seemingly trivial event should not be brushed off if it could easily happen again to someone else, with more serious results.

Reporting near misses is pointless unless something positive is done with the information. Near misses should be managed like any other hazard — investigated, prioritized, and corrected.

Once a near miss is identified, it must be reported promptly, preferably in writing, by either the person who identified it or by a supervisor to whom it was reported verbally by someone else. Report forms are useful and should be kept as simple as possible.

As much as possible, the "blame game" should be avoided. Any systems for dealing with near misses cannot be fully effective unless everyone understands the preventive value of reporting them and is comfortable doing so without fear of getting into trouble.

You should report a near miss even if you have removed the hazard or corrected the problem. Why? Many near misses are signs of larger safety problems that require attention, such as:

- Poor housekeeping.
- The need for an ongoing maintenance plan.
- Poor work area layout.
- Faulty work procedures or equipment.
- Insufficient training in safe work practices and procedures.

Proper investigation will reveal what caused the near miss and what priority should be given for further action. Near misses should be investigated as if someone had been injured, equipment damaged or property damaged.

Sometimes there is more than one cause, which can be either immediate or underlying. An immediate cause can be an unsafe condition such as a mechanical failure, or it could be an unsafe action by an employee. The underlying cause could be a missing machine guard or a crowded work area.

When the investigation determines that the near miss was serious enough to warrant preventive steps, they could involve:

- Eliminating the cause of the hazard.
- Reducing the potential hazard level or degree of risk of exposure to it.
- Installation of safety devices.
- Installation of warning signs.
- Implementation of new safe work procedures.
- Increased worker awareness of the hazard, such as through safety talks.

These steps should be taken as soon as possible, communicated to all affected personnel, and monitored to ensure they have been effective.

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