

# The Human Side of Safety



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Our mission is to improve the safety and success of people and the places where they work.

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## Accidents, Mistakes, and Failures

What's in a word? Most people use the words accidents, mistakes, and failures interchangeably. However, when you're focused on preventing safety-related mishaps understanding the distinctions can be helpful.

In a recent book called *The Upside of Down*, Megan McArdle does a great job of explaining the differences between accidents, mistakes, and failures.

For starters, accidents and mistakes are basically the opposite of each other.

*Accidents* refer to events you could not foresee, predict, or plan for. Usually, there's not much you can learn from an accident because there was no judgment in error. McArdle describes a friend's harrowing experience involving a rental car. Her friend rented the vehicle from a reputable company, but the steering system failed without warning. Even though it resulted in a five-car pileup with vehicles careening across the median strip, the driver walked away unharmed. There was no operator error or real lesson to be learned.

*Mistakes* are the instances when, with hindsight, you see things that you could and perhaps should have done differently, or better. If our car breaks down because we've ignored the blinking service light, that's a mistake—not an accident. We all make a lot more mistakes than we realize. Because they don't end in disaster most of the time, we often receive no feedback about the error of our way. For example, we drive while sleepy far more often than we crash. But that can change in an instant.

McArdle describes a *failure* as "a mistake operating without a safety net." These oversights often result in a catastrophic event or near-disaster. Too often, companies wait until a failure occurs before they take stock of error-ridden people, equipment, and processes.

By purposefully looking for mistakes, companies can learn to build the right kind and number of safeguards that are necessary to prevent failures—the kind of disasters that can really hurt a company's bottom line or reputation.

People generate more errors than they naturally realize. When companies actively look for and learn from ongoing mistakes, they can build safeguards to prevent costly disasters.