

The Human Side of Safety



Improving the health and safety of people and the places where they work.

Overcoming Mishaps: What's Your New Year Resolution?

In industries where attention demands are high, the work pace is fast, and the hours are long, by-the-book safety precautions can come to feel like too much of a good thing. The sheer number of times a employee must double-check a spreadsheet or job aid can represent obstacle in and of itself. Anything that we need to do twenty to sixty times a day is likely to be skipped a time or two. Nobody is perfect.

As Megan McArdle explains in her book, *The Upside of Down*, “We all go through our lives making a constant string of mistakes, but because nothing bad happens, we’re barely even aware of them.” Using the example of infections that patients pick up in the hospital and kill over 75,000 patients a year, McArdle explains, “That one moment when a doctor decides to wash her hands almost never kills anyone. But millions of such moments kill tens of thousands of people every day.”

The finger can rarely be pointed to any particular doctor or nurse when a hospital patient falls victim to a healthcare-associated infection. Not so, with many workplace mishaps. But far too often, we forget (or are unaware) of how the system set the employee up to fail. We tend to blame “the last man standing” rather than coming to understand what really led to the mistake.

There are plenty of safety violations that are treated as “quasi-errors” or “quasi-violations” because employees often disregard strict adherence to the stated safety expectation. Think how often employees neglect to wear their safety goggles in accordance with protocol. Like McArdle says, most of the time nothing bad happens.

But when someone gets an eye injury, do we blame the employee who wasn’t wearing goggles, or supervisors who tolerates slack safety practices? What about the executive who hadn’t made safety the overriding concern in his or her plant?

Given the human propensity to err in the form of minor slips and lapses, it is imperative to design safety systems to catch errors before they result in disasters. Businesses struggle mightily to do so.

Just because human error is inevitable, doesn’t mean that employees are always off the hook. By the same token, just because it is theoretically possible to build safeguards into a system to catch errors before they lead to disasters, doesn’t mean every workplace injury, illness, or serious mishap represents negligence on the part of the system or its managers. So often, safety comes down to building the social architecture to engage employees and build real accountability. That’s something easier said than done. It takes time, effort, strategy, and persistence.

If we punish or fire every employee who makes an error, we will discourage and/or deplete the already scarce number of employees in the skilled labor force. Employee burnout and turnover do not help safety.

Unless leaders approach employees with a mindset to uncover how they were set up for failure, rather than what is wrong with the “last man standing,” employees will cover up mistakes and oversights. This, in turn, will cause more mishaps in the long run. As a new year begins, what are you going to do to foster a safer work environment with greater openness about human and system failures?