

OHS PROGRAM: 5 Keys to a Near Miss Management System



In general, a near miss is an unplanned event that didn't result in any injury, illness or property damage but had the potential to do so. Near misses are gifts because they can reveal previously unknown safety hazards or issues that you can now address *before* they result in an actual safety incident. The OHS laws don't necessarily require employers to have formal near miss management systems. But to effectively manage near misses you need structure and procedures. So setting up a near miss management or reporting system or incorporating one into your existing OHS program will help you identify near misses, ensure they get reported and take appropriate steps to respond to them. Here are five keys to an effective near miss management system.

NEAR MISS REPORTING: Download and adapt a model near miss reporting form that workers can use to report near misses. You can also download and adapt a model incident and near miss reporting policy.

WHY YOU SHOULD MANAGE NEAR MISSES

According to the WSH Council's Guide to Near Miss Reporting, employers should manage near misses for the following reasons:

Proactive monitoring. Some companies use near misses as a leading indicator of their OHS performance. Near misses can be thought of as symptoms of an undiscovered problem at the workplace. They can occur repeatedly before an incident finally happens. So near misses are a leading indicator, amongst other safety performance indicators, that you should use to your advantage. That is, instead of waiting for an incident to happen before taking corrective action, by tracking near misses, you can take pre-emptive action *before* something happens.

Zero-cost lessons. Near miss events don't result in personal harm or property damage. So they provide vital safety information at no cost. Conversely, safety incidents bring about devastating loss and incur massive expenses that will interfere with daily operations. Plus, the company will have to spend additional resources to prevent a similar incident from happening in the future. Thus, it makes better business sense to work with near misses to uncover and address hazards at the onset before they escalate to costly outcomes.

Preventive action. In Heinrich's famous study of workplace incidents, Heinrich observed that for every incident that results in a major injury, there would be 29 incidents with minor injuries and 300 near misses. Although other studies conducted based on Heinrich's theory arrived at different figures, the general rule remained: near misses always occur in larger numbers than incidents. From Heinrich's observation, it's clear that a hazard can manifest itself through near misses. Companies should recognise that near misses provide an opportunity to identify workplace hazards. Once hazards are known, your company can take action to eliminate or mitigate the hazards and this prevent them from causing incidents.

Culture building. Near miss reporting can be a means to engage and empower all your employees. It can also foster an open safety culture where everyone shares and contributes in a responsible manner to improve safety and health for themselves and their co-workers. (To learn how to develop a near miss reporting culture in your workplace, watch this recorded webinar.)

5 KEYS TO NEAR MISS MANAGEMENT

You can have a freestanding near miss management system or simply integrate it into your existing OHS program and incident reporting system. In either case, the WSH Council's Guide recommends that your approach to managing near misses have these key elements:

1. Identify

Workers need to understand how to properly identify and recognize near miss events. To ensure that everyone in your workplace understands what a 'near miss' is, you must first clearly define this term. This definition should be broad and encompass a wide range of events. One suggested definition: A near miss is an opportunity to improve health and safety in a workplace based on a condition or an event with potential for more serious consequences, including:

- Unsafe conditions, such as wet floors;
- Unsafe behaviour, such as a worker failing to lockout a machine before making a repair;
- Minor incidents/injuries that had potential to be more serious;
- Events where injury could have occurred but didn't;
- Events where property or environmental damage could have resulted but didn't; and
- Events where a safety barrier was challenged, such as a worker disabling a machine guard.

2. Reporting

You can't manage near misses and learn from them if you don't know about them. So you should require workers to report a near miss, preferably in writing, to a supervisor or other appropriate individual, such as the safety coordinator. But a complicated procedure and overly-detailed report will discourage reporting. Thus, make the process for reporting near misses hassle-free and easy to understand. The form to be used should be kept as simple as possible, including the dates, location and a general description of the near miss incident.

Insider Says: Should you let workers report near misses anonymously? On one hand, anonymous reporting may encourage workers to speak up about close calls

without fear of repercussions, such as discipline or being considered a rat for reporting a co-worker's near miss. (See the box at the end for more reasons why workers may not report near misses.) On the other hand, anonymous reporting makes it impossible to follow-up with the person who reported the near miss to effectively investigate it. Also, anonymous reporting also undermines your near miss program by suggesting that near misses are bad and undesirable events. Although you certainly don't want to encourage near misses, you don't want them seen as events to be hidden.

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3. Investigate

When investigating a near miss, you should look at not only what had happened, but also what *could* have happened. Evaluate the possible consequences of the reported near miss and rank it by its potential severity and likelihood of occurrence. You can do so by taking these steps:

Prioritize the near miss. All near misses aren't created equal. That is, some near misses are a high priority because, say, they reveal a serious safety hazard, and so should be investigated and addressed immediately. But other near misses are a low priority and thus may not need immediate attention. Note that if a seemingly simple, low priority near miss happens often, it should increase in priority. The priority that you assign to each reported near miss will determine:

- The amount of attention that will be given to the incident;
- The depth of analysis that will be performed in finding its causes; and
- The amount of resources that will be dedicated to finding and implementing solutions.

Determine its cause. You should next determine both the direct and root cause(s) of the near miss. In many cases, it'll be easy to make this determination. But if the causes aren't readily apparent, you may need to form an investigative team to look into the event. In the end, conducting a root cause analysis of a near miss is really no different than doing one for a safety incident in which a worker was injured or killed.

Identify solutions. For each cause of a near miss, you need to identify a solution. Often near misses can be addressed with a simple solution, such as fixing a pipe so it doesn't leak and form a puddle in which workers could slip. But there may not always be an easy fix to eliminate the hazards related to the near miss. As with any safety hazard, the safety measures you can implement to address the causes of a near miss, ranked from preferred to least favored, include:

- Elimination of the cause of the hazard;
- Reduction of the potential hazard level or degree of risk of exposure to it;
- Installation of safety devices;
- Installation of warning signs to alert people to the hazard;
- Implementation of new safe work procedures to account for the hazard; and
- Increased worker training and awareness of the hazard, such as through

safety talks.

4. Intervene

Taking appropriate action in response to a reported near miss can not only prevent safety incidents but also encourage reporting because it shows workers that management is really listening to them and taking safety seriously. So implement the necessary solutions and inform anyone affected by the particular near miss, such as the worker who reported it and anyone who works with the equipment involved or in that section of the workplace. If the solution includes new or revised safety procedures, retrain all workers who'll have to use these procedures.

5. Review

Monitor the solutions you've implemented to ensure that they effectively address the causes of the near miss and don't create other unforeseen hazards. Also, because the data collected from near misses are leading indicators of your company's OHS performance, use it along with other safety performance indicators in reviewing your OHS program. The review can be done on a daily, weekly or monthly basis to identify trends. Reviewing and analyzing the data is an opportunity to gather feedback on performance and enhance your overall workplace safety.

BOTTOM LINE

Don't just breathe a sigh of relief when a near miss occurs. Recognize that these almost incidents are a valuable source of safety information that provide an opportunity for you to identify hazards or weaknesses in your OHS program and make corrections to prevent future incidents. So implement a near miss management program with these key elements and encourage workers to report near misses so you can improve the overall safety of your workplace.

5 Reasons Workers May Not Report Near Misses

You can only manage and learn from near misses if you know about them. That's why it's so important that workers report near misses but they may be reluctant to do so. According to CMW, a BC-based corporate insurance and risk management firm, there are five reasons why workers may not report near misses:

1. **They're afraid of punishment.** Most often, a worker avoids reporting a near miss out of fear of blame or repercussion. To counter this concern, you must create a workplace culture that prioritizes safety and encourage employees to report unsafe work conditions. Remind them that doing so protects both them and their co-workers and that they're protected from retaliation under the OHS laws.
2. **They don't want to look bad.** Workers may fear that owning up to a near miss will lead co-workers to see them as weak or incident-prone. So you should acknowledge and show appreciation for those who *do* report near misses. Doing so can help improve the company's safety culture, leading workers to not feel so worried about damaging their reputation within the company.
3. **They can't identify a near miss.** In some cases, a worker may not even realize or understand that a near miss took place. When that happens, the incident goes unreported and the underlying issue persists, creating an unsafe work environment. So educate workers on recognizing near misses.

Clearly define 'near miss' and illustrate the definition with concrete examples of near misses.

4. **They don't know how to report a near miss.** If your near miss reporting method is too complex or confusing, workers won't use it. You need a reporting system that's clear and straightforward. Train workers on how to report a near miss and remind them periodically of how to do so.
5. **They aren't motivated to report a near miss.** In some instances, workers may not see the benefit of reporting a near miss, especially if there's nothing tangible in it for them. Offering small incentives, such as company recognition, gift cards, etc., can increase the likelihood that a worker will report a near miss. Also, follow-up with workers who've reported near misses and show them how their report of a near miss led to the identification of a safety hazard and new measures to protect workers from it.