

Why You Should Put Safety Procedures in Writing



Verbal safety procedures aren't good enough. Why not'

Remember playing the game "telephone" when you were a kid' One child would whisper something in the next child's ear; that child would then pass along the message to the next child in the same manner. By the time the last child got the message, it was almost always nothing like what the first child originally said. The children along the "telephone line" misheard what was whispered to them or misunderstood it. And these errors or distortions were passed on and magnified along the way.

The same thing often happens in the workplace when safety procedures are passed along by word of mouth. The message will almost always get garbled in translation. But unlike the childhood game where the twisting of the original message is funny, errors or distortions of safety procedures can have serious, and often fatal, consequences—and result in costly fines.

ON Farm Fined \$90,000 for Failing to Have Written Procedures

An Ontario potato farm recently learned this lesson the hard way. As workers were harvesting potatoes, some plant material got tangled in the harvester and they cleared it away. The operator of the harvester was then told to reverse the machine. While in reverse, it rolled over and killed a worker.

The MOL found that the farm hadn't developed or implemented any written procedures for safely cleaning debris from the harvester. It pleaded guilty to failing to do so and was fined \$90,000 [[Tupling Farms Ltd.](#), Govt. News Release, Feb. 17, 2012].

Failing to Have Written Procedures Undercuts Due Diligence

Not having written safety procedures can also undercut your company's argument that it exercised due diligence if charged with OHS violations.

In another case from Ontario, a welder finished work on one side of a 285-kilogram steel smoke box and needed to flip it over so he could weld the other side. As the welder attempted to manoeuvre the box onto a forklift, his supervisor shook or pushed it to get it to fall inward. But instead of falling toward the forklift, the box fell outward onto the supervisor and killed him. The company was charged with two OHS materials handling violations.

The company didn't have any written procedures for handling materials. Instead, "the practice" was for workers to use a crane to flip smoke boxes. The company argued that its practice was safe because it hadn't had an incident in years. But the court said that "ad hoc practices" are no substitute for written procedures. "In this day and age there should be written procedures as to health and safety issues as opposed to a 'practice having developed'," the court explained [[R. v. Chrima Iron Works Ltd.](#), [2007] ONCJ 78 (CanLII), Jan. 12, 2007].