

# Being Aware of Your Surroundings Can Drastically

## Reduce Safety Incidents

All too often I read stories about workplace safety incidents in which employees are struck by an object around their job sites, and commonly their initial reactions are to say something along the lines of “I never saw it coming.” The notion that employees can be injured simply because they were not paying close enough attention to the machinery and objects in their work environment is unacceptable, and these types of accidents are almost always preventable.

Lacking awareness of one’s surroundings places employees in high-risk exposure situations that can lead to safety incidents, such as:



- Being distracted by loud noises or coworkers
- Taking one’s eyes off the road while driving
- Multitasking
- Rushing to complete a task
- Working while fatigued or extremely tired
- Working at a new job site

The outcome of employees' high-risk behaviors associated with low awareness of surroundings can be disastrous. For example, just days before Christmas last year, an independent contractor at Ford's auto plant in Kansas City died while working on the assembly line. Noticing a seat out of position in the line carrier, he entered a restricted area and attempted to correctly reposition it in order to avoid a halt in production. While doing so he became caught in the conveyer belt and was pulled along the line, which lifted him 15 feet in the air only to slam him to the ground, breaking his back. He was then dragged along the plant floor for several feet before finally being crushed behind some line machinery. No other workers were in the area at the time to witness the incident, and according to one report the contractor was pinned in that position for hours before he was discovered, by which time his injuries were too severe for him to survive.

The contractor violated the safety policy of not working on moving equipment while in operation in his attempt to resolve the problem quickly without stalling progress on the line, but this story serves as a grave reminder that we must **NEVER** prioritize production or quality over safety. Had he taken the time to temporarily stop the production line and lockout/tagout the machinery before fixing the misaligned seat, he would likely have gone home to his family that night. Therefore, it is critical that employees get in the habit of asking themselves these three questions before starting any task:

- Is there anything in my work area that poses a threat to my safety, and if so, to what extent?
- Is the threat great enough that I should stop working immediately?
- Is there anything I can do to reduce the risk exposure so that I can continue to work safely?

Organizations can work with their employees to reduce their risk behaviors related to this factor accordingly. To increase your awareness of your surroundings, we recommend that you:

### **Survey your work area before performing any tasks**

- Ensure that you have enough space to do your work
- Identify energy sources that require lockout/tagout procedures

- Look for hazards in your work area such as: low-hanging overhead objects, sharp edges or surfaces, standing water, exposed wiring, unguarded equipment, general work environment conditions
- Make sure that all safety devices on your equipment are in good working order before use
- Discuss work status and potential hazards with coworkers in your area and/or the person you are replacing at shift change prior to starting any work

### **Think before you act:**

- Before starting any task, be sure that you know the correct procedure to complete the job, have the correct PPE, and understand the present hazards of performing the task.
- Be aware of your body position and hands in relation to machinery, equipment, and other objects. Adjust, minimize, or slow your movements as required by your work environment to avoid contact with objects. Always walk behind moving equipment when possible, never obstruct your vision by overloading moving equipment, and use extra caution around corners and doorways.
- When transporting materials, walk the route you will be taking prior to moving anything. Look for obstacles such as uneven surfaces, trip hazards, objects you will need to maneuver around, and foot traffic.
- Don't create additional hazards — avoid running extension cords through high foot traffic areas, don't block exits or regularly used pathways and clean up once you complete a task or your shift (tools, debris, replace machine guards, electrical covers, etc.).
- Consider how many coworkers will be in your work area when you perform a task.
- Put up barriers and signage to warn others to avoid dangers in your work area.
- Don't become complacent. Employees who are too comfortable with their work surroundings may begin to overlook potential hazards.
- With all of the existing dangers around our job sites, it is important that we avoid further increasing hazard exposures by not paying attention to what is going on around us. Taking just a minute to evaluate our work areas and potential risks can save countless lives.
- Your Safety and the safety of your coworkers are dependent on your awareness of potentially hazardous conditions in the workplace. Take off the blindfold. There are thousands to see, hear, and smell in the workplace. Learn to observe and notice changes. If you do not recognize the hazard, you cannot control the hazard, you can't prevent the injury.

### **IT ALL STARTS WITH AWARENESS**