

NEAR MISS REPORTING AND INVESTIGATION

What is a near miss?

A near miss is a narrowly avoided mishap; an unplanned series of events that did not result in injury or property damage but had significant potential for those or other negative consequences to occur. Often, a fortunate break in the chain of events or a slight shift in time, position or condition makes the difference between a near miss and a crash. Below are a few examples.

- A weary driver drifts in and out of micro-sleep. Her grip on the steering wheel relaxes. The car wanders for the ditch. Fortunately, the driver re-awakens before the car leaves the road, and is able to recover control of the vehicle.
- It's a dark and rainy night. You've slowed down, but can't really see the worst accumulations of water. You hit a nasty puddle and your SUV hydroplanes. It veers to the right - where you spot a nearly invisible cyclist. Luckily, the cyclist looks up and gets out of your way just in time.
- It's another grinding rush hour. You leave enough room between your car and the fuel truck ahead. Suddenly a car darts in between - just as the truck driver ahead slams on the brakes. Anticipating that possibility, you have already started braking, giving the car ahead enough room for the necessary emergency braking. It's a close call, but not a crash.

The value of reporting and investigating near misses

Near misses are no-cost opportunities to learn how to prevent similar events - events that could just as easily result in a crash. By understanding what happened, employers can identify the conditions, decisions and actions that contributed to or caused the near miss - and implement controls to prevent reoccurrence.

Consider near misses as warnings. A workplace that is ripe with practices and conditions that allow a near miss to occur is also probably ripe with conditions and circumstances that can facilitate a more serious incident. If the circumstances and conditions that resulted in a near miss go unchecked, those same factors could be the cause of a crash - next time.

Reducing near misses and minor events will have positive influences on avoiding serious incidents. Learning from near misses and implementing corrective actions such as fatigue management procedures, equipping vehicles with good tires or making sure drivers have the skills they need are effective, low-cost measures that help prevent far more costly crashes and injuries.

For a variety of reasons, organizations sometimes struggle to get their near miss system up and running. If the system is too complex, employees are hesitant to step forward. Managers and supervisors are reluctant to fill out yet more paperwork. Below is a simpler approach that might work for you.

If you are a manager or a supervisor, spend time on the shop floor talking to employees, listening to conversations among drivers, asking them to share their "near miss stories". Every driver has at least one near miss story, an event where he or she "just about...."

Even if it didn't happen while they were driving for work, there is still value in sharing their experiences with others. Maybe other employees have not experienced a similar near miss. Once they hear what happened and how the crash was avoided, they gain knowledge they can apply - so the same thing doesn't happen to them. Perhaps several other drivers have experienced the same near miss, yet no one has figured out a solution. That's a great opportunity for a supervisor to initiate action and work together with the team to find a solution - for everyone's benefit.

The next time you are riding in a vehicle with one of your staff, talk about near misses. Tell them about a near miss you had. Ask them to share their experience. When you are in the coffee room or on the loading dock, listen for conversations about near misses. At the next tailgate meeting, encourage employees to share their driving stories. Get them to explain what happened and why, what they did or didn't do, and how those actions turned out. Other drivers are likely to pay attention to ideas and tips offered by their peers in a casual setting.

There is plenty to learn from informal, collaborative discussions. It's not a formal near miss reporting system. However, sharing experiences and storytelling are easy ways to report and learn about hazards, and to identify ways to take action to solve them.

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