

Do Accidents "Just Happen" In Your Workplace?

Generally, there are two approaches to safety — **reactive** and **proactive**:

The reactive approach: An injury happens. You investigate it, often with the main focus of the investigation being to determine whether the employee violated your safety rules.

Based on the investigation, recommendations are made about possible disciplinary action and hazard correction, and then corrective actions are taken.

In the reactive mode, you are taking the "accidents happen" stance. Most of your safety effort is expended in reacting to incidents *after* they occur, and you attempt to prevent future accidents primarily by investigating previous accidents. Because an injury occurs before safety action is initiated, this tends to be a costly way to go about things.

The proactive approach: You spend most of your time and energy in safety actions that anticipate injuries and illnesses before they happen.

Hazards that may potentially cause injuries are identified; the hazards are analyzed to determine risk and whether controls (engineering controls, management controls, etc.) can be used to mitigate employee exposure; information from the analysis is used to develop recommendations; and recommendations for corrective actions and system improvements are implemented — all prior to an injury or illness occurring.

Using a proactive approach shows that you view safety incidents as something that can be prevented, as opposed to something that just happens. Because a proactive safety approach initiates safety action prior to an injury or illness occurring, it costs less than a reactive approach.

Some key characteristics found in proactive safety programs include:

- **Hazard identification.** This includes periodic safety inspections — with a system of correcting hazards that are identified during inspection.
- **Behavioral observation and correction.** Regular and consistent observation and correction of employees' unsafe behaviors (using not only disciplinary action but also coaching and training to correct behaviors) are important in preventing accidents in the workplace.
- **Incentive and recognition.** Behaviors that help to prevent accidents are encouraged, such as participating in the safety process (e.g., serving on inspection or investigation teams or the safety committee), providing safety suggestions, and complying with safety rules.
- **Training.** Employees are provided with safety and job skills training that ensure they can perform their jobs safely. When performance deficiencies are found, additional training is provided.
- **Job hazard analysis.** The work that employees do has been analyzed to determine what risks are present, how those risks can be mitigated, and what skills, knowledge, and tools are necessary for an employee to perform the job safely.