

The Psychology of Near Misses

WHY WE IGNORE WARNINGS.

The Hidden Dangers of 'Almost'

We often breathe a sigh of relief after a near miss, thinking, 'That was close!' But what if these 'close calls' are actually flashing warning signs? Understanding the psychology behind why we often ignore near misses is crucial for creating a safer environment, especially in the workplace. This post explores the dangers of brushing off near misses, the biases that cloud our judgment, and how to cultivate a proactive safety culture.

A *near miss* is defined as an unplanned event that did not result in injury, illness, or damage – but had the potential to do so. Think of it as a warning shot fired across the bow before a major incident. Ignoring these warnings is like playing a dangerous game of chance.

Cognitive Biases at Play

Several psychological biases contribute to our tendency to disregard near misses:

- **Normalization of Deviance:** Over time, we become accustomed to small deviations from safety protocols, perceiving them as normal and acceptable.
- **Optimism Bias:** We believe we are less likely to experience negative events than others.
- **Confirmation Bias:** We seek out information that confirms our existing beliefs, potentially downplaying the significance of near misses if we believe our current safety measures are adequate.
- **Availability Heuristic:** We overestimate the likelihood of events that are easily recalled, such as major accidents, while underestimating the frequency and potential impact of less dramatic near misses.

These biases create a dangerous blind spot, preventing us from learning from our mistakes and proactively addressing potential hazards.

The Importance of a Culture of Trust

A culture of *trust* is paramount for effective near miss reporting. If employees fear reprisal or blame for reporting near misses, they are less likely to come forward. This creates a *climate of silence*, where valuable learning opportunities are lost.

To foster a culture of trust:

- **Focus on Systemic Issues:** Investigate near misses to identify underlying systemic problems rather than blaming individuals.
- **Encourage Open Communication:** Create channels for employees to report near misses anonymously and without fear of retribution.
- **Recognize and Reward Reporting:** Acknowledge and appreciate employees who report near misses, emphasizing that their contributions are valuable for improving safety.
- **Lead by Example:** Supervisors and managers should actively participate in near miss reporting and demonstrate a commitment to safety.

The Role of Supervisors and Toolbox Talks

Supervisors:

- Play a crucial role in promoting a safe work environment.
- Should actively encourage near miss reporting.
- Should conduct thorough investigations into reported incidents.
- Should ensure corrective actions are implemented promptly.

Toolbox Talks:

- Provide an opportunity to discuss recent near misses and lessons learned.
- Should be interactive and engaging, encouraging employees to share their experiences and insights.
- Help to reinforce safety procedures and promote a culture of awareness.
- Regular toolbox talks are essential for keeping safety top-of-mind.

By actively engaging supervisors and leveraging toolbox talks, organizations can create a more informed and proactive safety culture.

Key Takeaways

- Near misses are valuable warning signs that should not be ignored.
- Psychological biases can cloud our judgment and lead to the normalization of unsafe practices.
- A culture of trust is essential for encouraging near miss reporting.
- Supervisors and toolbox talks play a critical role in fostering a proactive safety culture.

By understanding the psychology of near misses and implementing strategies to address the underlying biases, we can create safer workplaces and prevent future accidents.