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Good Catch or Near Miss? Why the Answer Matters

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“Whew, that was a close one. He could have been killed. Today must be his lucky day!”

How many times have you heard that in your career? Chances are, just reading that sentence conjures a vivid memory of a workplace occurrence you've seen that could have been catastrophic. Safety professionals know these events by many names: close call, near hit, narrow escape, near collision, near miss, or the colloquial "close shave" or "squeaker." As if that's not enough ambiguity for such an important safety indicator, there's another term for this—frequently cited in safety circles—known as "good catch."

"Good catch" has such a kind and gentle ring to it; much friendlier than "near miss." "Whew, that was a close one. You could have been killed. Good catch, old friend!"

For too long, companies in all major industries suffered systemically from a culture of underreporting near misses, regardless of severity. This is a cultural byproduct and happens when trust levels are low and workers fear the consequences of reporting something so egregiously labeled as a narrow escape or near miss. There's potential for blame with such harsh terminology. Alternatively, a good catch program has positive undertones, insinuating an experience free from consequence. It's no wonder companies are tempted, albeit mistakenly, to record an acute near miss instead as a good catch.

The distinction between the two very different programs is an important one, as each has their own place in a healthy safety culture and each brings different data to light. Near-miss programs measure, as a lagging indicator, injuries, accidents, events or occurrences that have already transpired. Good catch programs record, as a leading indicator, observations, activities and actions that result, or may result, in a safer workplace.

Near Miss

The National Safety Council/OSHA Alliance defines a near miss as "an unplanned event that did not result in injury, illness, or damage—but had the potential to do so." The council concludes that near misses happen when there's "a fortunate break in the chain of events" that might have otherwise caused an injury, fatality or

damage, and that “a faulty process or management system invariably is the root cause for the increased risk that leads to the near miss.” Something happened that, if given a change in timing, position, circumstance, etc., could have damaged equipment or injured a person, but thankfully didn’t. A company’s near-miss program is intended to encourage incident reporting for events that have already happened, but for whatever reason didn’t result in impact or injury. It’s a more passive reporting vehicle (no action has been taken; instead someone just records a close call). Such reporting often has a stigma attached or, at the very least, there can be hesitation or reluctance to report. For example, if it occurred because someone ignored or neglected a safety procedure, there might be a reluctance to report it for fear of reprisal. It’s essentially a lagging indicator—something bad has already happened and now the company is forced to react to it.

Good Catch

A good catch is an action-oriented program that implies somebody did something positive to prevent something bad from happening. It goes something like this: “I recognized an unsafe condition, action, defect or flawed piece of equipment and I acted to prevent an event from occurring. I caught it early and prevented something unfortunate from happening.”

It can be as simple as one employee notifying a supervisor that there’s an unsafe condition present or, even better, saying there’s an unsafe condition and “this is what I just did about it.” When a company’s safety culture includes encouragement and recognition for employees who see something, say something, and do something to prevent events from occurring, the company has implemented a good catch program.

Good-catch programs are well-suited for cultures trying to initiate or reinvigorate a positive reporting experience. Employees can feel very good about taking some measure of action to potentially prevent a bad thing from happening. It’s an opportunity for employees to see the potential for an injury before one happens and

do something to address it. There is usually no stigma attached to this program since it isn't blame-based. There's no blame to administer if nothing has happened yet.

Three Characteristics: A Common Thread

These programs can even coexist in a mature safety process. Companies that are still building trust levels within the organization might consider launching just one at a time. Which one launches first is entirely up to company leadership. Ultimately, managers will have to decide whether the site has the bandwidth and appetite to work with good-catch leading indicators or if they're more inclined to first get a handle on their near misses. Most often, companies that are results-oriented are compelled to act on past events out of a necessity to stem the flow of more near misses before they can develop and work on the more predictive leading indicators brought forth by a good-catch program.

Regardless of the program or order in which they're implemented, the most effective near-miss reporting and good-catch programs share at least three characteristics.

First, each program must be easy to use and uncomplicated, so employees will be more inclined to make a report. In your organization, do your employees have to complete exhaustive paperwork or file a formal report to notify the supervisor of a conditional, procedural or behavioral opportunity in the workplace? If so, consider simplifying the process, even to the point where it is informal.

Next, the programs need to be well-communicated, so employees have absolute certainty the information collected will never result in reprimand—to anyone. Who controls this message in your company? Are employees telling tall tales of fellow workers being reprimanded or fired for reporting? Is there merit to that storyline? Or is the plant leadership reinforcing a more compelling truth that nobody is punished for making a report?

Finally, it's important to do something with the information collected so employees don't believe their report will go into a black hole, to never again see the light of day.

Employees are motivated by visible progress toward a goal, so it only makes sense to take deliberate action on reported items and communicate those actions to the workforce. Do the safety stakeholders in your company act on near misses and communicate those actions to employees?

Take an honest look at your current process for reporting and decide which program is best for your organization. Don't be afraid to apply these disciplines to enable a strong, proactive and action-oriented methodology to your near-miss and good-catch programs.

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