

Taking risks: what drives unsafe behavior

This resource is part of SAIF's leadership project, which is meant to help employers and leaders of organizations establish strong and sustainable safety cultures using research-based concepts and strategies.

When it comes to work related injuries and illnesses employees are often blamed for taking shortcuts, not caring about the rules, or not being able to follow even simple directions. The issue is more complex than the employees' choice; there are usually underlying factors that lead to unsafe behavior and risk-taking.

Why do employees take risks?

Here's a few stories to give you the idea:

- Bai knows he needs to stop his machine before un-jamming, but it constantly has problems, and his supervisor gets really upset if they miss a production goal.
- Everybody in Alice's department is required to wear hearing protection devices due to high noise levels. However, she and her co-workers often don't wear hearing protection because the employer provides only uncomfortable foam ear plugs.
- The maintenance team receives ladder safety training annually but still uses unsafe ladders because they have made three unanswered requests for new ladders to replace broken ones.
- Alejandro's roofing team frequently works without fall protection to get the job done quickly. They are paid by the job, so poorly quoted jobs and unforeseen issues slow them down and are barriers to making enough money to support their families.
- Aisha often doesn't put her respirator on when welding. It's uncomfortable, others don't wear them either and her supervisor never says anything. Besides, she hasn't seen anyone get sick (despite research that shows exposure over time can lead to occupational illness).

People take risks for many different reasons, but employees usually behave unsafely because of system failures and a lack of context, not because employees are trying to work unsafely. Blaming employees rarely fixes the problem and can even make things worse. The only effective way to prevent work related injuries and illnesses is to engage employees, understand the context, and learn and improve, uncomfortable or ill-fitting personal protective equipment (PPE), lack of safe equipment, pay for production, and poor safety culture. For more information see our Human and Organizational Performance handout (saif.com/hop). Also, if not addressed quickly, risk-taking behavior can even become self-reinforcing.

The risk-taking cycle

Take for example an employee who is trying to save time by using a ladder that is too short for the job. Using the shorter ladder is risky because they can't reach the boxes on the shelf without stepping on the top cap, a very unsafe part of the ladder. Manufacturers specifically put warning labels on the top cap because it's so risky.



Even though the act was unsafe, the most likely outcome was probably not a fall. Instead, they probably will successfully retrieve the item and climb back down, uninjured.

In other words, the employee saves time and effort without getting injured. This means the employee is likely to repeat the unsafe behavior the next time, the time after that, and the time after that. Eventually, they are convinced that it's safe to use the shorter ladder.

At this point the only way for the unsafe behavior to stop is likely an intervention by a supervisor, an empowered co-worker, a near miss, or a fall resulting in an injury. Waiting for a serious injury to happen is a bad way to break the cycle. Working on safety culture, training supervisors on safety coaching, and holding employees at all levels accountable for safety is the best way to break the risk-taking cycle.



How is the cycle broken?



Summary

Risk taking often doesn't result in immediate injury, but that doesn't mean that it's safe. Think about how many times you have driven a few miles over the speed limit in your car, skipped a step going down the stairs, or lifted something that was too heavy or awkward to lift by yourself. You most likely didn't get injured every single time you did it, but every time you do it you are taking a risk. If this behavior becomes a habit, luck tends to run out.

Activity ideas

- A. **GROUP DISCUSSION:** In a group, discuss times when you have observed or taken part in an unsafe act. Talk about how you could prevent them going forward.
- B. **USE:** Consider using the "I've got your back" Pledge (saif.com/ivegotyourback) at your organization. A team that discusses and signs this pledge is encouraged to speak up when they see unsafe behavior. Post the signed pledge in the workplace as an ongoing reminder.
- C. **REVIEW:** Look at past injuries that you may have blamed on an employee making a bad choice. Knowing what you know now, were there other things that could have led to the behavior?

What is risk-taking?

"The act or fact of doing something that involves danger or risk in order to achieve a goal"

– Merriam Webster