

Silent Danger

The Five Crucial Conversations of a Safety Culture

VitalSmarts has discovered that when workers use the phrase, “It was an accident waiting to happen” to describe a workplace safety incident, their words are true more often than not. The ugly secret behind most workplace injuries is that someone was aware of the threat well in advance, but was either unwilling or unable to speak up. Our research has discovered five workplace threats that are especially likely to become “undiscussables”:

- *“Get ’er done”*: These are rush jobs that seem to justify shortcuts.
- *“I think I can”*: These are demands that push a person beyond their skill level.
- *“Just this once”*: These are special cases that seem to allow exceptions to safe practices.
- *“This is overboard”*: There are extra precautions that are seen excessive.
- *“I’m a team player”*: These are threats that people accept as a part of their job.

A whopping 93 percent of the 1,300 employees we surveyed had at least one member of their work group who regularly created one of these five “accidents waiting to happen.” In fact, 46 percent were aware of an injury or death that was caused by one of these five undiscussables.

But here is the finding that is really troubling. When employees see one of these five situations, only one in four speak up. Failure to speak up and correct unsafe conditions allows the conditions to continue despite inevitable injury.

These results suggest that employees don’t need more training on safety audits or safety practices. They already see and recognize the threats. And it’s not that they don’t care. What we’re seeing isn’t bystander apathy; it’s more like bystander agony. Employees described themselves as “holding their breath,” “feeling tortured as they watched,”

and “not able to watch” as their coworkers put themselves and others in danger. But they didn’t speak up. In many cases, they don’t think it’s their role, they don’t know how, or they are afraid of retaliation.

Safety will always require individual vigilance and initiative, but nobody can be vigilant and proactive all the time. So safety demands that people look out for each other, remind each other, and hold each other accountable. Accountability is the “operating system” that underlies all of our safety programs.

At Southam Consulting, Principal Associate of VitalSmarts, we’re experts at building safety cultures: cultures where anyone can talk to anyone about anything. We’d like to work with you to measure whether your organization is vulnerable to these five “accidents waiting to happen,” and if it is, we’d like to help you build a safety culture—a culture where people speak up and hold each other accountable.