

How can training prevent future failures?

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Here we are some months later from when I last wrote about the substantial losses in confined space entry and rescue. Most recently there were two workers who just perished in North Carolina entering into a manhole. As tragic as this incident was, the fire department thankfully did their job and monitored the space prior to entry. The culprit was oxygen deficiency! What started as a normal work day ended with the worker and the rescuer / fellow worker both dead. Upon arrival, the fire department noticing two workers in the bottom of the manhole used their air monitor and determined the air inside to be oxygen deficient. After attempts to provide fresh air, the space was not able to be cleared requiring rescuers to enter on supplied air. This incident was 100% preventable. (If the workers had monitored the space prior to entry, had monitored continuously during entry, and had been trained to work in permit required confined spaces on supplied air; this tragedy could have been prevented. If only if.....)

I have mentioned several times that training is not only required but necessary to ensure that employees know what to do and how to do it. I am still baffled by the mentality of people that are so willing to take a risk. I have no doubt that the common person believes nothing will happen. I also believe that if someone does not know a hazard is present then they are more willing to venture into the great unknown. It is not like a person is standing there with a gun pointed at them telling them not to enter the space. In that case, it is clear that if the worker crosses the line that they will be shot. In confined spaces, the unknown, unseen and unaware is the killer. From what I have found, workers are more likely to enter into a confined space simply because there is no physical hazard present. In a nut shell, a worker commonly will not stick their hand into a running machine knowing that it will take your hand off all because he/she can relate to the physical hazard. So how do we break that mentality?

Let's look at the worker first. It is my belief, that after many years as a Safety Professional and a Firefighter, that everyone is different. Those that provide a standardized policy, program or training may be missing the boat. What one person sees as a risk, another will brush it off haphazardly? An individual's ability to recognize a hazard is what I consider to be the best approach to a safe situation. So how do we get there? Training obviously helps but typically only teaches what the standards or requirements mandate and not what should be done. After all, OSHA standards are the minimum that must be met. Nothing says we cannot be well above what OSHA requires. After all is it compliance or injury prevention that is the goal? Hazard recognition training is the key. For example, when I teach confined space entry I obviously teach what OSHA requires but also discuss best practice approaches and use all the equipment in scenarios using a simulator. This allows the student to know what OSHA mandates as law, what will keep them safe and lastly to demonstrate the use of the equipment they will need to work with. Hands on training; placing the student as Supervisor, Attendant and Entrant; setting

up a tripod; ventilating a confined space; filling out a permit; performing a retrieval and monitoring the space can and will make a worker safer!

Now, let's take a look at the rescuers. Traditionally, the fire service has responded to emergency calls to put the water on the fire, assist at auto accidents and support medical calls for help. Over the last few decades the fire service has evolved into providing a widely trained and technical rescue individual. We obviously still do the traditional stuff but also now perform detailed searches, water rescues, high angle retrievals, wild land firefighting, terrorist attacks, hazardous materials and a host of other requests. The problem is, as requests for emergency services have changed, unfortunately the training has not. There is a real serious issue with training new fire recruits in traditional techniques. Time is of the essence and unfortunately there is not enough time to properly train a rescuer to respond to any and all emergency calls. So what happens is that the emergency responders will wing it and do what the public expects us to do and that is to perform the rescue. The typical career firefighter will complete a 240 hour training where a volunteer will complete somewhere between 40 and 120 hours before ever being exposed to interior fire attack. Unfortunately, after completing the initial training it is common for minimal monthly training to suffice as maintenance of skills and not so much new training. This may not be the case everywhere, but I believe that it is all too common of a problem. Departments need to see the gaps that we have and start implementing new skills training in some of the scenarios mentioned above or we will continue to see incidents just like those already mentioned.

So where does all this put us? Workers have a failure because they are not trained to recognize a hazard and how to properly use equipment. Rescuers have a failure because they are not given the training on how to recognize a hazard, perform the rescue and also how to do it safely. Both situations are avoidable but unfortunately appear to be more and more common. In both examples, traditional training techniques have been successful in the past but with all of the changes, it is imperative that we revamp our training methods. Take a close look at what topics you are training on and how your employees are receiving the training. Take a look at your specific situations and train your employees on how to handle them. Provide your employees with the tools, skills and abilities to work safe and work smart. Repeat the training as necessary and make demonstrations and skill checks a part of your training program. Verify that your people know how to perform in any and all situations whether it is an emergency or not. Lastly, embrace the changes that have and will occur at your location; after all your employees should be your most valuable asset!

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