



The Accident Investigation: A Study in Prevention

As the adage goes: Learn from your mistakes. This rule also applies to the work environment. Employers should constantly examine why accidents occur and try to find ways to keep them from happening in the future.

The scope of an accident investigation should be proportional to the incident. The more major the incident being investigated, the more comprehensive the investigation needs to be.

Prior to any internal investigation, you must ensure that the incident location is not disturbed, except to perform first aid and to prevent further injuries. Once the scene is secured and the proper authorities are notified, you should immediately conduct the internal investigation. This starts with assembling your team.

Failure to act on what is learned from the investigation could expose employees to potential hazards and expose employers to potential citations and fines.

The Accident Investigation Team

Conducting the investigation is a team effort. It is recommended that you have in place a basic investigation team that can respond immediately and effectively should an accident occur.

Confidentiality should be determined before the initial investigation team meets. If you wish to make the investigation confidential, you will need to include legal counsel on the team and filter all correspondence and draft reports through legal counsel. Note that, even with such legal counsel, the final report will likely not be confidential, as it needs to be shared to be implemented.

Customize the final makeup of the team to reflect what it will be investigating and include both management and employees. The basic team will consist of:

1. A leader. Choose a leader who keeps the team focused and on task.
2. Experts. The team experts will be determined by the incident, so be prepared to adjust the team as your needs change. You may not know exactly what expertise you need until the investigation is well under way.
3. Document control personnel. Organize and preserve the documentation collected during the investigation. The team's underlying documentation and data should be preserved.
4. Legal counsel. Have legal counsel present if the investigation process is going to be considered a privileged, confidential attorney/client work product.

Other team members may include a root cause analysis expert and a person specifically responsible for writing the final report. It is important the team be large enough to cover the necessary expertise but small enough to not get bogged down.

The Investigation

With the proper team in place, you are now able to start your investigation. You should begin with the following:

1. Interview witnesses and/or those who have relevant knowledge of the incident.
2. Visit the site where the incident occurred. (Remember that until the site is released by all agencies involved, you cannot move anything except to provide first aid or to prevent another accident.)
3. Review the company's existing Accident Prevention Plan.
4. Review existing protective and safety equipment.
5. Review manufacturer's recommended uses and operation manuals for any equipment involved in the accident.

After the investigation is complete, the team will prepare a written report of its findings and provide recommendations on how to avoid repeat accidents. In forming recommendations, the team should consider such things as:

- Do employees need additional or refresher training?
- Are procedural changes needed?
- Are equipment changes needed?
- Do employees have ideas for safety improvements?
- Is discipline or corrective counseling needed?

The employer must be ready to act on the results. Failure to act on what is learned from the investigation could expose employees to potential hazards and expose employers to potential citations and fines.

Learning from your mistakes will lead to a safer work environment and a healthier bottom line. A proper accident investigation will help you get there.

ROBERT A. BATTLES is counsel to the firm at Lane Powell, where he represents clients in regulatory and complex litigation matters including occupational safety and health investigations and defense. Prior to joining Lane Powell, he was with the Washington State Attorney General's Office for 10 years and represented the Department of Labor and Industries. He can be reached at battlesr@lanepowell.com or 360.753.7604.