



The Two Types of Serious Injury and Fatal Exposure Incidents

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Most organizations are undertaking the challenge of determining which of their incidents have Serious Injury and Fatality potential (SIFp). This effort allows leaders to ensure that the incidents receive the level of scrutiny warranted by the potential that exists, not the severity of the outcomes. All incidents, no matter how minor, require some level of review and attention, but not all incidents rise to the level of having SIFp.

Generally, organizations allocate a response based on three classifications. One important element in all three is the expectation that all three get reported. The reporting is necessary for having a targeted exposure-reduction approach. The first two classifications are:

Low potential, infrequent incidents

There is not a reasonable likelihood that a serious injury or fatality (SIF) could happen with these events. Typically, the incident is recorded and local leadership handles the learning process and action planning. These incidents are rarely shared outside the location.

Low potential, frequent incidents.

The difference between these incidents versus the first is that the organization is suffering a pattern of injuries. While any individual incident may not warrant a deep learning approach, when the organization looks at the whole of the incidents, it may decide that a special-event learning response is necessary. A few common areas where patterns can be found are with soft tissue injuries, cuts, and lacerations. Most organizations share the results of the learning approach and address the issue in their safety action plan.

Serious Injury and Fatality Potential Incidents

This third classification represents incidents that have a reasonable likelihood of a SIF actual. These incidents also require the greatest focus on deep learning. Both the incidents themselves and the findings are generally reported to the most senior levels of the organization.

As we work with organizations, we have found it useful to classify SIFp events as follows:

- **Scheduled:** Planned work tasks that include a SIF exposure.
- **Unscheduled:** Unplanned work tasks that have SIFp. Often these occur “in the moment” and force an employee to make an immediate decision regarding controlling the SIF exposure.

Both types require that workers engage in a high-risk activity for which protections are required in order to control SIF exposure. For example, unscheduled is when a machine jams, requiring the worker to de-energize the equipment to clear the jam. A planned maintenance inspection on that same machine that also requires a worker to de-energize the equipment would be considered a scheduled high-potential incident. The former is unplanned; the latter is planned.

Scheduled. Most organizations know when employees will be entering a confined space, working at height, working in environments with temperature extremes, or working on equipment that needs to be de-energized. The SIF exposure is known, and how to control it is typically well understood. It could be argued that no organization should ever experience a SIF actual incident from a scheduled SIF exposure.

These exposure events typically have detailed planning, a dedicated permitting procedure, and an event-specific safety briefing where exposure control is a major focus. Over the course of the work, leadership uses field verification of critical controls audits to assist employees with maintaining the control mechanism. If these safety activities are done well and employees are empowered to handle exposure variation, no one should ever get seriously injured doing these high-risk activities.

Unscheduled. These kinds of SIF exposures are the bane of most organizations. These are the seemingly random SIF exposure events. But the truth is, most of these are not random at all; they are predictable. We cannot pinpoint the exact time they will happen, but we know they will happen. Think about the fatalities you have heard about: someone entering a confined space without a permit, entering a grain elevator only to be swallowed by the grain, or someone deciding to make one last adjustment on an operating piece of equipment.

Consider a line jam, whether it is a paper machine, bottling machine, or a belt moving protein. When we analyze incident data and identify an organization’s high-risk situations, we will find that there is a history of these lines jamming. Unfortunately, there is also a history of employees who have suffered dearly, because, in the moment, they believed that the best decision was to reach into the machine to clear the jam. Most of the time, they are fortunate and clear the jam without injury. But there are other times a SIF actual happens.

Addressing these types of SIF exposures requires a focus on safety climate and building individual resiliency. This has to happen well before the unscheduled, high-risk situation occurs, and it requires constant reinforcement.

How can leaders deal with unscheduled SIF exposures?

First, leadership must be disabused of the belief that these types of SIF exposures are unpredictable or even rare. They have happened in the past and they will happen again.

There are two crucial actions necessary to ensure these unscheduled SIF exposures are controlled. Employees must have resiliency. Resiliency is the ability to respond effectively to unplanned changes. Resiliency means that employees must know the right and desired action and are able to resist the other forces that might compel them to make the opposite decision.

This right decision-making happens only if both the leadership and culture support the decision being made. There cannot be a shred of doubt in the employee’s mind that the proper action is to do what it takes to control the exposure.

Second, leadership must monitor the contextual factors that influence safe decisions and rebalance those factors when they are misaligned with safe decision-making.

By contextual factors, we mean decisions occurring within a context. A few of the factors affecting safe decision-making include:

- Safety climate
- Pause work support
- Work group relations
- Level of production pressure
- Equipment reliability
- Level of fatigue
- Job knowledge and skills

When these factors are aligned correctly, employees are more likely to identify exposures and take actions necessary to control the exposure.



The Three-Pronged Approach

A robust SIF Prevention approach starts with detailed analytics. An organization must first understand the types of SIF exposures that exist in their organization and the types of high-risk situations that place employees in peril. Once the organization's SIF risk profile is well understood, it is time for aligning the prevention activities.

Prevention requires a three-pronged approach.

In Prong 1, once the analysis is complete, the organization has to continually evaluate every incident to determine if SIFp exists. If so, the incident will require examination in order to put the exposure into context.

This means understanding what happened that day, week, or month that created a situation where a SIF exposure went either unidentified or uncontrolled. Serious effort must be put into finding interventions that are on the top half of the Hierarchy of Controls.

Prong 2 is a complete life-cycle review of the safety processes associated with scheduled SIF exposures. This should start with questioning whether the task could be done without creating a SIF exposure. If it is decided that the exposure cannot be

avoided, then a detailed review of the planning around SIF exposure control must be performed. It must include how the employees will be engaged in the discussion and planning and involve the traditional safety activities, like job safety briefings and verification audits, to reinforce the expectations that the exposure must be controlled.

What we are talking about with Prong 2 is how an organization manages a scheduled SIF exposure event.

Prong 3 is about safety leadership and enabling employees to make safe decisions. In the majority of cases of unscheduled SIF exposures, leadership must rely on the employee to make the right decision in the heat of the moment. This happens only if management empowers the employee to make the right decision and gives him or her the knowledge needed to be confident in that decision.

Finally, management must have its finger on the pulse of what is happening regarding the textual factors that influence safe decision-making. This means having self-awareness about how to influence the safety climate, an understanding of team dynamics, and an ongoing appreciation for the challenges employees are facing in meeting their multiple objectives.

Learn More Interested in exploring the types of SIFps at your organization? Connect with us:

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