

SAFETY 101 – Back to Safety Basics

Chief Bill Jenaway, Ph.D., CSP, CFO, CFPS
Executive Vice President, VFIS Education and Training Services

“Safety starts with the acceptance of personal responsibility to be safe.”

The issue of firefighter safety continues to be a primary concern. At VFIS, we know more can be done to better manage firefighter injuries, illnesses and fatalities. Cultural issues, leadership strategies and operational philosophies can each create barriers to improving safe performance. But what if we went back to the basics of industrial safety and made sure we were applying fundamental safety practices to our jobs—every day?

Accidents cause economic and social loss, impair the productivity of both individuals and groups, create inefficiency and lower the standard of living. In all cases, the elimination of accidents is vital to public interest.¹

The traditional definitions of safety are:

- a) Freedom from danger or hazard; exemption from injury or loss.
- b) Incapable of doing harm, no longer dangerous, in secure care or custody.²

Before the industrialization of the United States, there were minimal concerns for occupational safety. However, as factories expanded and humans interfaced more and more with machines and hazardous situations, the concern about being “safe” while working on the job became more significant. The need to work more safely achieved prominence with the passage of the first effective workmen’s compensation act in 1911.

In all cases—by intent, definition or interpretation—the term “safety” means to keep one safe from injury, illness, damage or theft. As we have worked through the last century, safety has become a vital part of general daily activities, growing, in fact, to become an integral part of emergency service operations.

The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 was intended to “assure, so far as possible every working man and woman in the nation, safety and healthful working conditions and to preserve our human resource.” At the time of its adoption, the legislation was designed to consider both the safety issues of the day as well as working environments of the future.

By the late 1970s, the National Safety Council advanced six reasons for a continuing, concerted effort to prevent accidents.

1. Needless destruction of life and health is a moral evil.
2. Failure to take necessary precautions against predictable accidents involves moral responsibility.
3. Accidents severely limit efficiency and productivity.
4. Accidents produce far-reaching social harm.

5. The safety movement has already demonstrated that its techniques are effective in reducing accident rates and promoting efficiency.
6. Nothing in the available data suggests that safety professionals are near a limit in their ability to extend the moral and practical values of accident prevention.³

I believe three major issues have contributed to the priority of safety in the workplace:

1. The human factor of being safe and the adversity of financial loss, injury, illness, death and property damage.
2. The introduction of worker’s compensation insurance protection.
3. The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970.

These three factors have been the primary motivators in both the workplace and in general to maintain a safe working environment. Specific approaches to safety adopted by individual industry segments (e.g., secondary standards such as NFPA and NIOSH), insurance company loss control requirements, and changes due to litigation are secondary impacts upon the original idea of safety.

It is important to realize that **safety is not the same as risk management.**

Despite the common inter-usage of the two terms, they are not the same. Risk management evolved from the insurance industry, which

combines risk control and risk financing to manage risk. The safety function is one component of risk control, which includes the practices of loss avoidance, loss prevention, loss reduction, transfer of risk by contract and the segregation/separation of exposures to reduce risk. Many times the application of the term “risk management” to fire department operations is either an unintentional or intentional misnomer for loss avoidance, loss prevention, loss reduction or separation/segregation techniques.

Now that we understand the nuances of safety versus risk control versus risk management, we can move on to an important element in keeping firefighters and emergency medical personnel from being injured, becoming ill, being killed or causing property damage: **identify and analyze how incidents occur and prevent them from happening again.** ⚙

1 Excerpt from the National Safety Council Philosophy, Accident Prevention Manual for Industrial Operations, 7th Edition, National Safety Council, Chicago, IL.

2 Hyperdictionary, “Safety” reference Webster’s 1913 Dictionary, Webnox Corp. 2002-2003.

3 Accident Prevention Manual for Industrial Operations, 7th Edition, National Safety Council, Chicago, IL, 1978, pages 2-3.



SAFETY 101 LESSON TO REMEMBER...

Safety (being safe) is a concept every person in the ESO must understand and accept as a key principle of operation, or your efforts to reduce accidents, injury, property damage and death will not be successful!

Safety starts with the acceptance of personal responsibility to be safe.