



Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd

Occupational Health and Safety

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Understanding the real causes of incidents

Did you know that accidents start before someone gets hurt.

In many small and medium-sized businesses, when an incident happens the first question asked is often: “Who made the mistake?” While this reaction is understandable, it rarely leads to meaningful prevention. Incidents almost never occur because of one person or one action. They develop over time through a combination of system weaknesses, environmental conditions and human behaviour.

Understanding the root causes of incidents allows organisations to address the underlying conditions that make accidents possible rather than repeatedly correcting symptoms.

To truly improve workplace safety and comply with the Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA), employers and employees must shift from blame to understanding. Compliance is not simply about having documents on file; it is about ensuring that systems function effectively in daily operations and that risks are controlled before someone is injured.

Incidents start long before the injury

Think of an incident like a tree. The injury or damage you see is only the trunk. The real causes lie beneath the ground, hidden in the roots.

Understanding the root causes of incidents means digging below the surface to identify weaknesses in planning, communication, supervision, equipment and work design.

These roots generally fall into three categories:

1. Organisational factors — The system around the worker

Many incidents originate in the way work is organised rather than how work is performed. Organisational weaknesses quietly create conditions where mistakes become likely.

Common workplace examples:

- Unclear instructions or procedures
Employees may receive verbal instructions that differ from written procedures, or procedures may be

outdated, overly complex or not aligned with actual work practices. In these situations, workers improvise, increasing risk.

- Lack of training or supervision
New employees are often expected to “learn on the job” without structured induction. Supervisors may oversee too many staff members to provide proper oversight, allowing unsafe practices to develop unnoticed.
- Poor communication between management and staff
Changes in processes, equipment or expectations may not be formally communicated. Employees may hesitate to report hazards if they feel their concerns will be ignored.
- Unrealistic deadlines or production pressure
When production targets are prioritised without considering safe working speeds, employees are indirectly encouraged to take shortcuts to keep up.
- Employees unsure of what is expected of them
Vague job roles and shifting responsibilities can result in critical safety tasks being overlooked because everyone assumes someone else is responsible.

When employees must “figure things out themselves”, they will create their own methods. These methods often work until the day they don’t. For employers, this means compliance is not just paperwork. A procedure only protects you if it is understood, practical and enforced consistently.

2. Human factors — Understanding people, not blaming them

Human error is often listed as the cause of an incident, but this is usually incorrect. Human error is normally the last link in a chain, not the root cause.

Understanding the root causes of incidents requires distinguishing between different types of human behaviour.

Human errors fall into two main groups:

Unintentional errors

These show system weaknesses:

- Slips (pressing the wrong button)
This may occur where controls are poorly labelled or positioned too closely together.
- Lapses (missing a step)
Often linked to distraction, fatigue or interruptions during a task.
- Misjudgement due to unfamiliar tasks
When employees perform tasks without adequate training or guidance.
- Decisions based on incorrect assumptions
For example, assuming a machine is isolated when it is not properly locked out.
- Fatigue or stress
Long working hours, staff shortages or personal stressors reduce attention and increase risk.

These require training, supervision, better procedures, or improved working conditions, not discipline. They indicate that the system did not sufficiently support safe performance.

Deliberate violations

Employees knowingly bypass rules, often because:

- The job cannot be done within the allowed time
Safe methods may be perceived as too slow under production pressure.

- The correct method is impractical
Equipment may be stored too far away, or procedures may not reflect real working conditions.
- Production pressure is high
Workers may feel that output is valued more than safety.
- “This is how we’ve always done it”
Unsafe shortcuts become normalised over time.

This is not purely misconduct it is a management signal. It indicates the system encourages risk-taking, even if unintentionally. Punishment alone will never fix this. Leadership, realistic planning and proper risk management will.

3. Material factors — Tools, equipment and environment

Even a well-trained employee in a well-managed workplace will be exposed to risk if the environment is unsafe. Understanding the root causes of incidents includes evaluating the physical conditions under which work is performed.

Typical contributors:

- Poor maintenance
Equipment breakdowns, leaks or worn components increase the likelihood of injury.
- Defective equipment
Tools that are damaged or unsuitable for the task create unnecessary hazards.
- Missing guards or protection
Safety devices removed for convenience expose workers to moving parts or hazardous processes.
- Disorganised work areas
Poor housekeeping leads to slips, trips and restricted emergency access.
- Inadequate lighting or layout
Poor visibility or cramped spaces increase the risk of error.

A safe workplace requires reliable tools and proper housekeeping. Preventative maintenance and regular inspections are not optional extras they are essential controls that reduce both injury and legal exposure.

What This Means for Employers

Under the OHSA, employers must provide a workplace that is safe “as far as reasonably practicable.” This requires more than reacting to accidents it requires preventing them through structured systems and active leadership.

Practical actions:

- Conduct meaningful risk assessments
Identify real hazards in daily operations, not just theoretical risks.
- Investigate near misses, not only injuries
Near misses provide early warning signs before serious harm occurs.
- Train staff on why procedures exist
Understanding the reason behind a rule improves compliance.
- Encourage reporting without fear of blame
Create a culture where raising concerns is seen as responsible behaviour.
- Review workload and deadlines
Ensure productivity targets do not indirectly promote unsafe practices.
- Maintain equipment proactively
Scheduled inspections and servicing prevent failures that could cause injury.

What This Means for Employees

Safety is a shared responsibility. Employees play a critical role by:

- Following procedures even when shortcuts appear faster.
- Reporting hazards early. Small issues often become major incidents if ignored.
- Reporting near misses. These are learning opportunities, not admissions of guilt.
- Asking when unsure for clarification to prevent assumptions.
- Avoiding shortcuts. Temporary time savings can result in permanent consequences.
- Supporting a safety culture by encouraging colleagues to work safely strengthens the entire system.

Reporting a near miss is not causing trouble, it is preventing an injury.

Building a Culture of Prevention

A workplace becomes safe when people stop asking “who is at fault?” and start asking “what allowed this to happen?” When incidents are properly analysed, people learn, systems improve, legal risk decreases, productivity increases and trust grows. Prevention is always cheaper than reaction both financially and humanly.

Every incident is a message from the workplace system. Fix the system, and the behaviour improves automatically. Analyse the causes. Act on them. Prevent the next incident. A safe workplace is not achieved by luck, but it is built through understanding, leadership and cooperation.

Strong safety culture protects both people and business.

For more information, please contact us on info@topcompliance.co.za

Yours in Health and Safety

				
Occupational health and safety auditing and consulting		Online safety shop		
				
Appointments, checklists and templates	First aid equipment	Signage	Legal posters	Safety Equipment

Courses offered by Top Compliance (Pty) Ltd

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	Online	Onsite Excluding travel
Safety representative – Legal Liability	R980.00	R1300.00
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	R1250.00	R 1730.00
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	R735.00	R875.00
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	R735.00	R875.00
Basic Ladder Safety Course	R735.00	R875.00
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses		
Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	R735.00	R875.00
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	R810.00	R950.00
First aid		
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures – THEORY MODULE	R400.00	-

ONLINE ACADEMY - https://academy.topcompliance.co.za/		
Occupational Health and Safety Courses		
Safety representative – Legal Liability		
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Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment		
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ONSITE TRAINING	
First Aid Courses:	
Level 1 - US 119567 - Perform basic life support and first aid procedures	2 days
Level 2 - US 120496 - Provide risk-based primary emergency care/first aid in the workplace	3 days
Level 3 - US 376480 - Provide first aid as an advanced first responder	3 days
Level 1 & 2 - US 119567 & 120496	3 days
Level 1, 2 & 3 - US 119567, 120496 & 376480	5 days
Level 2 & 3 - US 120496 & 376480	3 days
Child and infant CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking	6 hours
Adult CPR & choking and AED	1 day
Occupational Health and Safety Courses	
Safety representative – Legal Liability	1 day
The Occupational Health and Safety Act & responsibilities of management – Legal Liability	1 day
Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment	1 day
Food facility health & safety course in terms of R638	6 hours
Basic Ladder Safety	6 hours
Fire Fighting and Prevention Courses	

Fire Marshal - Basic firefighting	6 hours
Fire & Evacuation marshal - Basic firefighting with emergency action planning	1 day