

WORKPLACE HEALTH AND SAFETY

Spring into Safety

Refresh, reconnect and recognise progress

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Spring offers a natural opportunity to renew workplace safety. A positive seasonal campaign can help a team recognise what is already working, refresh controls that have weakened and build energy around practical prevention. The aim is not to decorate a safety programme. It is to make safe work easier, more visible and more meaningful.

A season for practical renewal

Spring often changes how a workplace operates. Temperatures rise, daylight hours change, outdoor work increases, vegetation grows, maintenance projects restart and organisations prepare for a busy final part of the year. Conditions differ across South Africa, so every workplace should consider its own location, activities and risk profile.

This makes spring a useful management checkpoint. It is an opportunity to look beyond outstanding problems and ask a constructive question: what can we refresh now so that safe work is easier to maintain through the coming months?

A well-planned spring safety initiative may help a workplace:

- identify seasonal or emerging hazards before work becomes busier;
- remove clutter, deterioration and obstacles that have accumulated over winter;
- review whether risk controls are still practical and effective;
- reconnect employees, supervisors and safety representatives with the purpose of the safety system;
- recognise people who contribute to prevention; and
- set one or two realistic improvement goals that can be measured and sustained.

The legal foundation remains active

Section 8(1) of the Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993 requires every employer, as far as is reasonably practicable, to provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risk to the health of employees. Section 8(2) supports this duty through requirements that include safe systems of work, hazard identification, precautionary measures, information, instruction, training, supervision and enforcement of safety measures.

Where clients, learners, visitors, contractors or members of the public may be directly affected by workplace activities, section 9(1) requires the undertaking to be conducted so that, as far as is reasonably practicable, those persons are not exposed to health or safety hazards.

Section 13 requires employees to be informed about the hazards connected to their work and the precautions that must be taken. Section 14 requires employees to take reasonable care, cooperate with the employer, obey lawful health and safety requirements and report unsafe or unhealthy situations.

Health and safety representatives may, under section 18, review the effectiveness of health and safety measures, identify potential hazards, inspect the workplace, investigate complaints and make representations. Sections 19 and 20 provide for consultation through health and safety committees and allow committees to make recommendations on matters affecting health and safety.

Important distinction: A spring safety campaign is a voluntary management initiative, not a statutory event or fixed legal deadline. It does not replace site-specific HIRAs, prescribed inspections, maintenance, training, medical surveillance, emergency planning or any other duty required by applicable legislation, regulations, standards or manufacturer instructions.

Begin with what is working

Safety discussions often begin with failure. Hazards, overdue actions and non-conformances must be addressed, but an organisation also needs to understand why work goes right. Effective controls should be identified, protected and repeated.

A short spring walkabout can include positive questions such as:

- Which control makes this task safer and easier to perform correctly?
- What improvement made the biggest difference during the past six months?
- Which checklist identifies defects before equipment fails?
- Where has a recurring hazard been successfully prevented from returning?
- What do experienced employees do that should be included in the formal procedure?
- What small change would remove frustration or make the safe method more practical?

The answers may reveal good supervision, thoughtful layout, useful checklists, effective maintenance, strong teamwork or employees who consistently speak up. These strengths are part of the safety system and should be maintained, not taken for granted.

Positive does not mean complacent

An uplifting campaign must still deal honestly with serious risk. Positivity in safety is not pretending that everything is fine. It means creating the confidence and practical support needed to identify problems early, act on them and learn from the result.

A mature positive safety culture makes it acceptable to say:

- This task cannot continue until the required control is in place.
- I made a mistake and we should understand how the system allowed it.
- This procedure no longer reflects how the work is performed.
- The interim control is weakening and needs to be reviewed.
- The change worked well and should be applied elsewhere.

The goal is a workplace in which people can report both difficulty and success without fear, and where management responds consistently to both.

Six practical ways to refresh safety this spring

1. Refresh the work environment

Conduct a risk-based housekeeping and condition inspection. Look beyond appearance and confirm whether the workplace is safe to access, use and maintain. Check storage, emergency routes, walkways,

stairs, lighting, ventilation, drainage, waste areas, guards, signage, chemical storage, first-aid arrangements and the accessibility of firefighting and emergency equipment.

Outdoor areas may require attention to uneven paving, loose material, overgrown vegetation, blocked drains, water accumulation, damaged fencing, pest activity and routes used by pedestrians and vehicles. A spring clean must itself be planned safely so that moving stored items, using chemicals, working at height or engaging contractors does not introduce new risks.

2. Renew risk assessments and procedures

Review whether existing HIRAs, safe working procedures and checklists still reflect the work being performed. Give attention to new equipment, altered layouts, changed staffing, new substances, contractor activities, recurring defects, previous incidents and seasonal work.

Review should be driven by the applicable legal requirement, changes in the work, new information and evidence that a control is no longer effective. A workplace may also set a suitable planned review cycle as part of its own management system.

3. Reconnect with employees

Use brief, focused conversations at the place where work is performed. Ask employees what slows down the safe method, which defects recur and what would help them work correctly the first time. Include employees who perform routine and non-routine tasks, maintenance personnel, supervisors, contractors and health and safety representatives where relevant.

Close the communication loop. If a suggestion cannot be implemented, explain why. If it can be implemented, assign it, set a realistic date and confirm the result. Visible follow-through builds confidence that participation has value.

4. Revive emergency readiness

Confirm that emergency contact details, appointments, communication methods and responsibilities remain current. Inspect emergency exits, escape routes, assembly areas, alarm systems, first-aid facilities and emergency equipment. Consider visitors, contractors, persons with disabilities, isolated workers, after-hours activities and seasonal events.

Training, briefings and drills should be based on the workplace risk and applicable requirements. A familiar procedure is useful only if people can recognise the alarm, understand their role and act correctly when normal conditions are disrupted.

5. Recognise preventive action

Recognition is most useful when it is immediate, specific and connected to an action that reduced risk. Thanking a person for a meaningful contribution shows the team what good prevention looks like.

Suitable contributions to recognise may include:

- reporting a hazard, near miss or deteriorating control early;
- stopping or postponing work when a critical precaution was missing;
- completing a thorough inspection and recording defects honestly;
- suggesting a practical engineering or layout improvement;
- helping a colleague understand a safe working procedure;
- participating constructively in an investigation, drill or committee meeting; and
- verifying that a corrective action actually worked.

6. Reset one measurable goal

Choose a small number of leading indicators that show whether preventive activity is improving. A goal such as reducing the response time for high-priority hazard reports is more useful than a broad instruction to 'be safer'. The measure should be understandable, within the organisation's control and reviewed often enough to support action.

Recognise reporting, not silence

An injury-free period is welcome, but the absence of reported incidents does not prove that hazards are controlled. A reward based only on having no reported injury can unintentionally place pressure on employees not to report. Recognition should therefore focus on participation, truthful reporting, control of hazards and verified improvement.

International guidance from the United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration supports the use of leading indicators and recognition linked to activities such as hazard reporting, safety suggestions, training, inspections and preventive maintenance. It also cautions that incentive programmes must not discourage injury or illness reporting. This guidance is not South African law, but it provides a useful good-practice principle: reward the actions that strengthen prevention, not the silence that hides risk.

A useful test: Would an employee still feel comfortable reporting an injury, near miss or unsafe condition if doing so affected the team's reward? If the answer is uncertain, redesign the recognition programme.

Measure the conditions that create success

Lagging indicators such as injury numbers describe events that have already occurred. They remain useful, but should be considered together with leading indicators that show whether the preventive system is functioning.

Practical leading indicators may include:

- time taken to assess and respond to hazard reports;
- percentage of high-priority corrective actions completed and independently verified;
- quality and frequency of management safety walkabouts;
- preventive maintenance completed by the planned date;
- employee suggestions reviewed and improvements implemented;
- quality of workplace inspections and follow-up;
- employees who can demonstrate the relevant procedure after training;
- emergency actions completed correctly during a drill; and
- recurring hazards that have been eliminated or sustainably controlled.

A higher number of reported hazards may initially show that trust and participation have improved, not that the workplace has suddenly become less safe. The quality of the reports, the speed of response and the effectiveness of close-out provide the necessary context.

A practical four-week spring approach

This is a suggested management campaign, not a statutory timetable. Immediate or serious risks must still be addressed according to their urgency, the applicable legal duty and what is reasonably practicable.

1. **Week 1: Listen and inspect.** Conduct a focused walkabout, invite employee input and identify both effective controls and areas needing renewal.
2. **Week 2: Correct and communicate.** Complete safe quick wins, apply interim controls where permanent work needs time, assign responsible persons and communicate changes.
3. **Week 3: Practise and strengthen.** Refresh a priority procedure, coach employees in its practical use and test one emergency or abnormal situation.
4. **Week 4: Verify and recognise.** Check whether actions reduced the risk, share the results, recognise meaningful contributions and select the next preventive goal.

Basic workplace examples

Storeroom reset. Employees identify that frequently used items are stored above shoulder height and emergency equipment is partly obstructed. Management redesigns the layout, removes obsolete stock, provides suitable access equipment and recognises the team for proposing a safer system. Follow-up confirms that the new arrangement is being maintained.

Outdoor route improvement. A safety representative and grounds employee identify a pedestrian route damaged during winter. The area is made safe immediately, the permanent repair is assigned and completed, and the route is reinspected after rain. The improvement is shared as an example of effective cooperation.

Checklist improvement. An operator explains that a generic pre-use question does not help employees recognise a specific defect. The HIRA and procedure are reviewed, the checklist is made more precise, employees are coached and later records show better defect detection.

Emergency readiness. A short drill reveals that new employees and a contractor do not know the assembly area. The induction process is corrected, the site plan is clarified and the next exercise confirms improvement. The drill is treated as a learning opportunity rather than a search for blame.

What a successful spring campaign leaves behind

The campaign should create more than a tidy workplace or a motivational poster. It should leave behind evidence that the safety system is stronger, including:

- hazards removed or controlled and actions verified;
- clearer work areas, access routes and storage arrangements;
- risk assessments, procedures and checklists that reflect actual work;
- employees who understand the precautions and feel able to speak up;
- more useful inspections, committee discussions and management reviews;
- improved emergency readiness;
- recognition linked to participation and prevention; and
- a small set of measures showing whether improvement is being sustained.

The key message: Spring safety is not a once-off clean-up. It is an opportunity to make prevention visible, participation meaningful and improvement worth repeating. Positive safety is not the absence of reports. It is the presence of trust, action and learning.

How Top Compliance can assist

Top Compliance assists organisations with occupational health and safety audits, HIRAs, procedures, corrective-action guidance, committee support, emergency planning and practical training for health and safety representatives, managers and employees.

Yours in Health and Safety

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Legal references and good-practice sources

- Occupational Health and Safety Act 85 of 1993, particularly sections 8, 9, 13, 14, 18, 19 and 20. South African Government: <https://www.gov.za/documents/occupational-health-and-safety-act>
- United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Leading Indicators: <https://www.osha.gov/leading-indicators>. Used as international good-practice guidance, not as South African law.
- United States Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Employee reporting and incentive programme guidance: <https://www.osha.gov/recordkeeping/modernization-guidance>. Used as international good-practice guidance, not as South African law.

This newsletter provides general occupational health and safety guidance. It is not a substitute for legal advice or a site-specific assessment. It should be applied together with the Occupational Health and Safety Act, applicable regulations and incorporated standards, manufacturer requirements, local requirements and the workplace's site-specific risk assessments and procedures.