



Pitfalls of Incident Investigations & How To Avoid Them

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DEEP BLUE

Why this topic?



- Missed opportunities to identify real causes and develop effective corrective actions.
- Incident investigations devolve into a “blame game”.
- Management practices causing incidents are not identified and addressed.
- Corrective actions are cliché and ineffective.
- The outcomes of incident investigations are wrongly viewed as solely reactive initiatives rather than capitalizing on the proactive possibilities.

Seeking to Blame



- The incident investigation process is often used to assign blame for the negative outcomes.
- Which element of the organization is most often blamed in incident investigations?
- EMPLOYEES
- Why are employees so often assigned the blame for an incident?
- Easy targets with layers of policy and training that give employers a false sense of confidence they are protected.

Negative Impacts



- When employees are blamed, trust in the process breaks down.
- When employees are blamed, trust in those engaging in the process breaks down, and it carries over to other duties.
- Can lead to less reporting for fear or punishment, retaliation or humiliation.
- Can minimize employee participation in investigations leading to incomplete analysis and corrective actions.

Avoiding Blame



- State purpose of Incident Investigation Process and adhere to it!
- Do not enter into investigations with the intent of figuring out “who messed up” or “which employee(s) is at fault”.
- When employee actions may have caused the incident, seek to understand why the employee engaged in the specific behavior(s).
- Keep in mind that CONTEXT is just as important as INCENTIVES and POLICIES.

Non-Methodical Approach



- The lack of a methodical or systematic approach to investigating incidents increases the likelihood causal factors (causes) could be missed or misdiagnosed.
- Higher probability of missing elements of a successful investigative and corrective action process.
- Often observed when investigators have not been trained in or exposed to a methodical approach.

Methodical Approach Solutions



- Research and adopt an incident investigation method that suits the organization.
- Build and follow an incident investigation policy/process focused on identifying causes, developing corrective actions and measuring effectiveness.
- TRAIN incident investigation team members on selected methodology.
- Communicate the intention of the incident investigation policy/process to all impacted parties so they understand the purpose and value.

Confirmation Bias



- “Confirmation bias is our tendency to seek out or interpret information that supports our pre-existing beliefs, expectations, or hypotheses.”
(<https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/confirmation-bias>)
- “I already know what happened just by the description.”
- “I’ve seen this a thousand times and it’s always...”
- Investigators will seek evidence that confirms their preconceived notions and may miss pertinent facts or evidence leading to real causal factors (causes).

Avoiding Confirmation Bias



- Acknowledge the possibility and train your investigation teams to resist the temptation.
- Follow a methodical process to investigate the incident.
- Be intentional about letting the evidence lead investigators to causal factors (root causes).
- Apply Change Analysis tool to confirm the identified element is a cause and not a condition (to be addressed next).

Conditions vs. Causes



- Conditions are not causes!
- Conditions are the result of a cause.
- Conditions are often lower-level elements and tend to place the process breakdown at the feet of employees.
- Addressing conditions will not maximize the desired outcome of implementing effective corrective actions.

Conditions Example



- Employee falls from step stool being used to access a valve placed out of reach from ground level.
- Rigging fails during a critical lift but there is no record of rigging training or inspections of rigging materials.
- Employee injured while not wearing PPE or wearing the wrong PPE but management doesn't enforce policy.

Avoiding Identifying Conditions as Causes



- Methodical approach to incident investigations.
- Use of the 5 Why method is a simple tool to help: If there's a why to the factor, it could be a condition and not a cause.
- Use Change Analysis to validate the alleged cause.

No or Ineffective Corrective Action

- Company will hold a safety stand down with employees.
- Retrain employees.
- New policy to be written and implemented.
- How often do we hear these recited as “corrective actions”?
- Corrective actions are the most critical informational component of a successful incident investigation! (Not a fancy flow chart, diagram or report.)

Effective Corrective Actions



- Agreed upon by all stakeholders.
- Supported by management (resource allocation and accountability).
- Measurable!
- Time bound.
- Likely address other types of unforeseen incidents. (Hot work example.)

Failure to Verify Corrective Actions



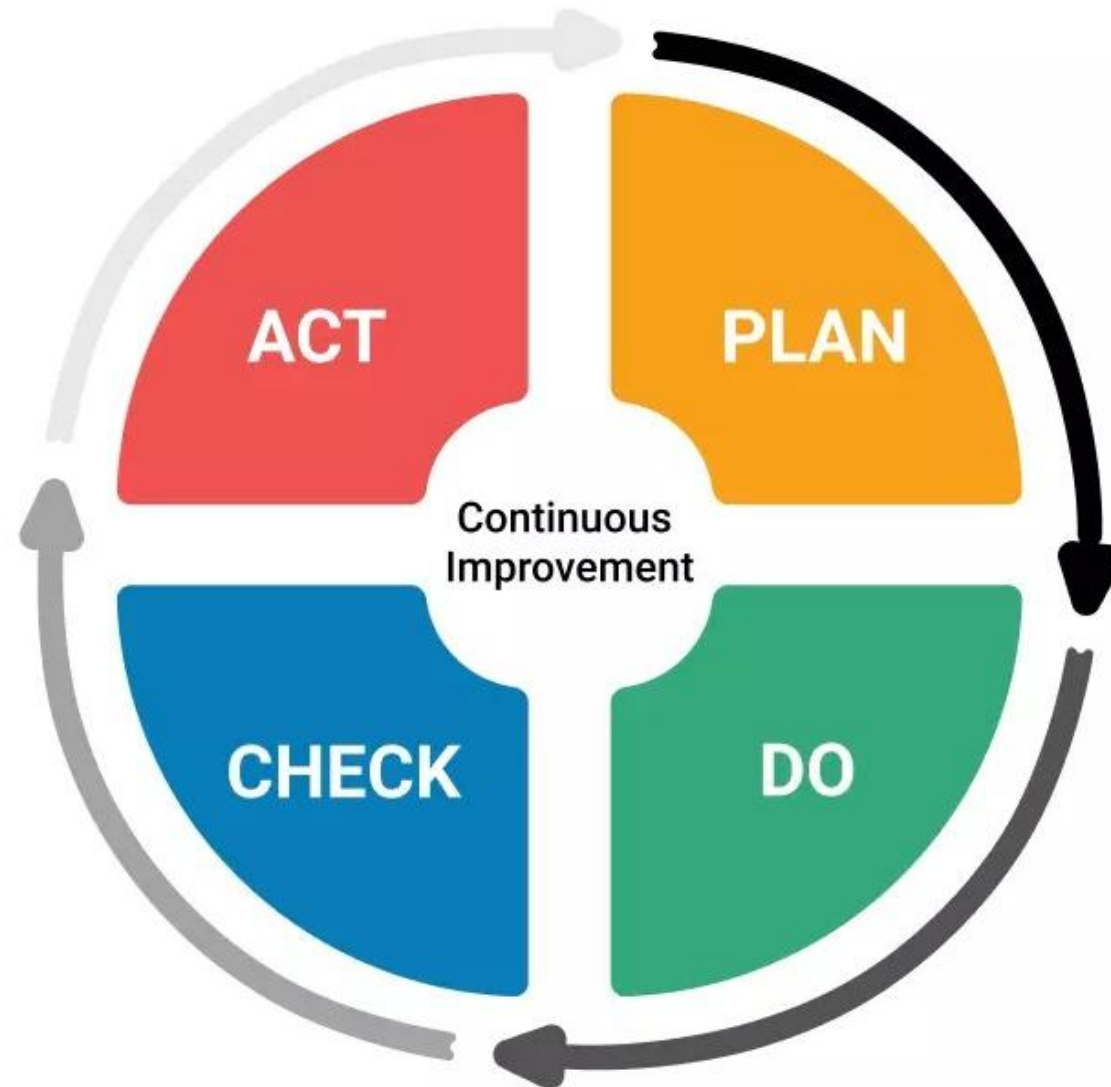
- Corrective actions are worthless if they are not implemented and measured for successful impact and/or improved as needed.
- Creates a “smoking gun” that could be used by regulators (think SOX Act) or in civil litigation to demonstrate willful disregard if not plain indifference.
- Invalidates virtually the entire process of investigating the incident and determining causal factors (root causes).

Successful Implementation of Corrective Actions



- Ensure there is full management and operational support prior to implementation.
- Understand the value propositions for not only the high-level stakeholders, but those directly impacted by process changes.
- Thoroughly communicate the corrective action implementation plan to all impacted parties and provide the knowledge and tools needed to successfully execute.
- Set time-tables, KPIs and measure impact.
- Apply Continuous Process Improvement Cycle to corrective actions.

Continuous Process Improvement Cycle (PDCA Cycle)



Honorable Mention



- Not doing an investigation at all.
- Failing to include operational personnel in incident review teams.
- Failure to communicate challenging findings to management.
- Failing to preserve “clean” documentation.
- Including statements or content in investigative materials that could prove to be embarrassing or damage the integrity of the process.

Question and Answer Period



Thank you all for your time and participation!

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