



Beyond the Physical Toll:

The Collateral Damage of Safety Incidents

Workplace incidents and injuries can have far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the immediate physical harm suffered by an employee.

By Shawn M. Galloway

While leading a recent workshop at a client location, the introductions began by individually discussing how incidents at work have affected us. One story shared left an impact on all in attendance.

Fifteen years ago, an employee suffered what at the time seemed like a simple and small fracture to their leg after a fall. What resulted was a total of 12 surgeries, and the employee's wife became addicted to the opioids he was prescribed. Tragically, she passed away due to her addiction. Workplace injuries and incidents can have far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the immediate physical harm suffered by an employee.

The collateral damage resulting from such incidents can significantly impact various aspects of an organization and the lives of those connected to injured individuals. This article explores how the aftermath of safety incidents can affect the organization and the family members and colleagues of those involved.

Impact on the Organization

One of the primary types of collateral damage resulting from safety incidents is their significant impact on the organization. The direct financial costs associated with medical expenses, workers' compensation claims and potential legal fees can strain the company's resources. These financial burdens may hinder the organization from investing in growth opportunities or allocating funds to other essential areas. Sometimes, they lead to the organization's demise.

At a minimum, safety incidents often result in decreased productivity and disruption to operations. When an employee is injured, their absence or reduced capacity to work can lead to delays in projects, increased workloads on remaining staff and potential setbacks in meeting deadlines. This ripple effect can have long-term implications for the organization's overall performance and reputation. Here are a few examples.

Deepwater Horizon: The drilling rig explosion in 2010 resulted in one of the largest environmental disasters in history. The incident led to the release of millions of barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico, causing extensive environmental damage, loss of marine life and significant economic repercussions for the region. BP, the company responsible for the rig, faced immense backlash, lawsuits and financial losses in the aftermath of the disaster, highlighting the severe consequences of safety failures in the oil industry.

Rana Plaza: The Rana Plaza garment factory collapse in Bangladesh in 2013 resulted in the death of over 1,100 workers and injured thousands more. The building's poor structural integrity and disregard for safety regulations were key factors in the tragic incident. The factory's collapse exposed the unsafe working conditions prevalent in the garment industry, leading to widespread outrage, international scrutiny and a significant impact on the businesses sourcing from the factory. Several clothing retailers faced reputational damage and financial losses due to their association with the Rana Plaza disaster, emphasizing the importance of ensuring workplace safety in supply chains.

Boeing: The Boeing 737 Max aircraft crashes in 2018 and 2019, which claimed the lives of 346 people, were attributed to design flaws in the aircraft's automated flight control system. The safety incidents that continue to make the news raise serious concerns about Boeing's safety protocols, regulatory oversight and transparency in the aviation industry. The crashes resulted in the grounding of the 737 Max fleet,

significant financial losses for Boeing, and a tarnished reputation that eroded customer trust and investor confidence and, most recently, led to the resignation of the company's CEO, David Calhoun. The safety incidents underscore the critical importance of prioritizing safety in the design and manufacturing of aircraft to prevent tragic consequences.

Some businesses have failed to recover from the aftermath of safety incidents, ultimately leading to their closure. Let's delve into some examples of businesses that have faced this fate.

Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant: The 1986 Chornobyl disaster resulted in a catastrophic nuclear accident that led to the evacuation of nearby towns, loss of life and long-term environmental consequences. The safety incident not only had a devastating impact on human lives but also led to the closure of the nuclear power plant. The economic fallout and public distrust in nuclear energy contributed to the plant's closure, highlighting the severe consequences of safety incidents on businesses.

Takata Corp.: Takata Corp., a Japanese automotive parts company, faced a massive safety scandal when it was discovered that their airbags were defective and could explode, leading to numerous injuries and fatalities. The company faced billions of dollars in fines, lawsuits and recalls, ultimately filing for bankruptcy in 2017. The safety incident not only tarnished Takata's reputation but also led to its downfall.

Peanut Corp. of America: Once a leading supplier of peanuts and peanut products in the United States, in 2009 the company became embroiled in a salmonella outbreak linked to its products, resulting in multiple deaths and illnesses across the country. The safety incident led to the company's closure and criminal charges against its executives, underscoring the severe consequences of compromising on food safety standards.

These examples further illustrate the detrimental impact of safety incidents on businesses, ranging from environmental disasters and workplace tragedies to product malfunctions in high-risk industries. Businesses must learn from these cases to prioritize safety, implement robust safety measures, and uphold ethical standards to prevent similar incidents and safeguard their long-term viability.

Impact on Family Members

The aftermath of safety incidents extends beyond the organization, affecting not only the injured individuals but also their family members. Watching a loved one endure pain, suffering and the threat of losing their livelihood due to an incident can take a toll on emotional and practical well-being. Family members may also feel a sense of responsibility for the repercussions of incidents that impact consumers of the products or services provided by the company their loved one works for, which can deeply affect their mental health.

Further, family members of an injured employee may face financial strains due to medical bills, reduced income or the need to take time off work to provide care. The emotional toll of witnessing a loved one's pain and recovery process can lead to anxiety, stress and strained relationships.

Impact on Colleagues

Similarly, colleagues of an injured employee may experience guilt, fear, grief or a sense of vulnerability, affecting their own work performance and overall morale within the organization. Witnessing a workplace accident or injury can be traumatizing. Colleagues may >>

struggle with survivor's guilt or worry about their own safety at work. The incident can also disrupt the dynamics and morale within the team, as team members may need to take on additional responsibilities or face increased workloads to compensate for the injured employee's absence.

Safety incidents can strain relationships between colleagues and the injured employee's

family as well. In some cases, colleagues may feel a sense of guilt or responsibility for the incident, even if it was beyond their control. This can create tension and strained relationships within the workplace.

As an example, a utility company employee's significant injury resulted in the need for extensive and long-term rehabilitation, causing emotional distress for

their spouse and children. The family had to make significant adjustments to their daily routines and bear the financial burden of medical expenses, leading to increased stress and strained relationships. Additionally, the worker's colleagues experienced a sense of guilt and fear, impacting their motivation and overall productivity. One colleague who witnessed the incident firsthand is seeking therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder.

In addition to ensuring physical safety, organizations must prioritize the mental well-being of their employees. This can be achieved by fostering a culture of care and support where employees feel comfortable reporting any concerns or issues related to their well-being. Providing access to mental health resources and support programs can go a long way in helping employees cope with the emotional toll of safety incidents.

Organizations should also strive to adequately support injured employees' family members and colleagues. This can include offering financial assistance or resources to alleviate the financial burden that often accompanies safety incidents. Additionally, providing access to counseling services or support groups can help family members and colleagues navigate the emotional challenges they may face.

Safety incidents have collateral damage that goes beyond the physical toll. Organizations can prevent and mitigate the consequences of safety incidents by (1) prioritizing the implementation of comprehensive safety protocols with recovery and support systems for those affected and (2) continuously auditing and assessing their effectiveness and adherence to them. Employees will feel comfortable reporting concerns and issues related to their well-being due to a fostered culture of care and support within the organization. This will contribute to overall mental well-being and create a safer and more supportive work environment. Let us strive to create workplaces where everyone feels safe, supported and cared for. **iP**

About the Author: Shawn M. Galloway is CEO of ProAct Safety (<https://proactsafety.com>) and an author of several bestselling books. As an award-winning consultant, trusted adviser, leadership coach and keynote speaker, he has helped hundreds of organizations within every primary industry to improve safety strategy, culture, leadership and engagement. Galloway also hosts the highly acclaimed weekly podcast series "Safety Culture Excellence."

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