

HEALTH & SAFETY COMMITTEE**Focus of the Month**

Issue No 6

Supervising Safety

Under health and safety legislation the employer is legally responsible for ensuring compliance with the law.

In reality, employers have to delegate down through the management chain to help ensure this duty is met. The larger the company and the more layers of management there are, the bigger the effort becomes to effectively communicate and implement this duty.

One of the most pivotal roles in helping achieve the corporate health and safety Policy objectives – and, arguably, often underrated - is the position of Supervisor (or equivalent).

The shop floor supervisor is in a unique position to influence Company employee relationships and good practice at the 'sharp end' of the business **if** the employer:

- Accepts and endorses the value of the role;
- Appoints competent supervisors;
- Adequately resources and trains the supervisor;
- Empowers the supervisor to take appropriate action where safety is compromised.

Consider the following incident:

A supervisor in a steel stockholders warehouse was meant to be 'supervising' a new employee to check his competence in operating a Reach Truck.

The supervisor decided to go upstairs and make a phone call, leaving the new employee 'unsupervised' in an unfamiliar and busy area.

A company lorry reversed (unsupervised) into the warehouse and struck the FLT, which toppled over and was damaged beyond repair. Fortunately, the lift truck operator stepped off the truck seconds before impact and was uninjured (see photo).



Lack of effective supervision contributed to this costly incident

The voice of steel distribution

The root cause of the incident was management failure, but the immediate cause was the supervisor's failure to actually supervise! The investigation revealed:

- The supervisor had received no training as to his responsibilities;
- He was not aware of the Company's H&S Policy requirements;
- The lorry driver knew he should have been supervised during reversing, but claimed no one ever actually carried it out in practice;
- The site manager was on holiday when the incident occurred – no delegation of health and safety duties had been apportioned to cover his absence.

The costly incident could have been avoided if the supervisor was adequately trained and competently aware of his responsibilities, which might have included, for example:

- The continual checking and comparing of 'good practice' against actual work methods/activities;
- Checking that forklift trucks, other vehicles, mechanical lifting and all other warehouse work equipment is serviceable, used and positioned correctly;
- Ensuring that no employee under his area of control uses any hazardous equipment without suitable training, authorisation and adequate supervision. Being particularly vigilant for:
 - People 'cutting corners';
 - New/non-routine operations;
 - Young persons/work experience placements (under 18 years of age);
 - New starters; and
 - Visiting drivers, employees, contractors activities, etc.
- Checking that vehicle reversing, loading and off-loading operations are carried out by trained staff, with adequate supervision where necessary and in accordance with the Company H&S Policy.
- Ensuring that all safe working procedures and instructions are available, known and observed. Supervisors should continually examine and review these procedures in practice and discuss them with employees, and where necessary, management. The aim being to ensure that they remain workable and easily understood.
- At all times, set a good example for employees to follow.

A Final thought:

An effective and competent supervisor will identify and plan what health and safety actions are required at the start of all new tasks and projects. It's no good wondering how to work safely half-way through the job.

'Sods Law' will always take advantage of poor risk management!

DISCLAIMER: This is the opinion of the NASS H&S Committee but only the courts can interpret the law. All employers should refer to the legislation.