

Hitting the Nail on the Head: Prioritizing Safety at Your Nonprofit



By Emily Stumhofer

Resource Type: Articles

Topic: Facility, Program and Transportation Safety

Countless Center consulting clients and Affiliate Members list safety “Safety incidents at a nonprofit can result in the loss of life or permanent injury, plummeting employee morale, reputational damage, insurance claims and costly financial and human resource burdens for the nonprofit.” risks at the top of their concerns. Yet some organizations—especially those that aren’t dealing with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA) “Fatal Four” hazards (falls, electrocutions, being struck by an object, and crushing injuries) that make up nearly 60% of fatalities—may not see the necessity of having workplace safety strategies in place. Although 2014 OSHA statistics indicate that 20% of workplace fatalities occurred in the construction industry, safety hazards are present in all work environments. Safety incidents at a nonprofit can result in the loss of life or permanent injury, plummeting employee morale, reputational damage, insurance claims and costly financial and human resource burdens for the nonprofit. Sector leaders must safeguard their missions from these consequences, and strive to cultivate safe environments for their employees, volunteers, and service recipients.

Common Workplace Safety Mistakes

Adopting a Too-Narrow Definition of Safety

A common failure of many safety initiatives is defining the term so narrowly that it neglects the broad landscape of safety risk. In some cases, the term *safety* refers to the wellbeing of nonprofit personnel.

Alternatively, *safety* may refer more broadly to the programmatic operations of the nonprofit, including appropriate maintenance and use of facilities and equipment, reducing the risk of harm to vulnerable clients (e.g., children, clients with disabilities or frail adults), and even ensuring that programs have only minimal or neutral impacts on the environment.

Many nonprofit leaders are familiar with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and some of the safety regulations stipulated by the OSH Act. Yet for some, OSHA brings to mind a construction site where workers wear hardhats and steel-toed boots, “Begin putting safety first by defining safety, taking time to understand your safety hazards, and setting safety goals tailored to your workplace environment.” or a laboratory where scientists in goggles carefully label and store hazardous chemicals. But there is much more to a safe workplace, and the Center recommends a vigilant approach to safety, even if hazards are not easily identifiable in your customary operating environment. Begin putting safety first by defining *safety*, taking time

to understand your safety hazards, and setting safety goals tailored to your workplace environment.

According to OSHA, there are six different categories of common workplace hazards:

1. **General safety hazards** are described as the most common, and may include spills and falls, working at height or in confined spaces, electrical hazards and machine-related hazards.
2. **Biological hazards** include blood, mold, bacteria, insect bites, plants, and other natural allergens.
3. **Physical hazards** may include things such as radiation, exposure to sunlight or UV, exposure to extreme temperatures or loud noises.
4. **Ergonomic hazards** include uncomfortable workstations that promote poor posture, heavy lifting, repetitive movements, and constant vibration. Most ergonomic hazards become problematic when workers are exposed to the hazards on a frequently over a long period of time.
5. **Chemical hazards** include cleaning products, paint, vapors and fumes, gases, flammable materials and pesticides.
6. **Work organization** hazards may include stressors such as heavy workload, violence in the workplace, high intensity or pace of work, levels of flexibility and control at work, and social support and interpersonal relationships.

Assuming Safety is Common Sense

Promoting safe practices requires a dose of common sense and a culture of safety and hazard awareness. In most office settings, it's easy to overlook subtle safety hazards or assume that everyone is safe. But do not discount the need for safety skills training, protective equipment, and special conditions training—even in a seemingly safe environment. Keep in mind that safety precautions may seem like common sense to an experienced or skilled worker, but they might not be obvious to workers or volunteers who are new to their job responsibilities and duties, or new to your workplace. The opposite phenomenon is also sometimes true: experienced personnel may be cavalier about hazards that alarm brand-new employees and volunteers.

In general, relying on common sense when it comes to safety is unwise. Asking employees and volunteers to rely on their own internal and individual senses of safety leads to the inconsistent use of safety precautions. In addition, imagine trying to defend your reliance on common sense after an employee or volunteer is involved in a serious or fatal injury.

Ineffective (or Nonexistent!) Training

Common workplace health and safety hazards include accidents involving motorized vehicles, exposure to toxins, repetitive motion injuries and exposure to communicable diseases. Although some of these hazards may be rare at your nonprofit, all are possible exposures. Your employees and volunteers require safety training to prepare them to identify and respond to the diverse hazards that could arise.

Most nonprofits are exposed to transportation safety risks. Transportation safety training for employee and volunteer drivers might include a review of:

- the driver screening process and driver qualifications (e.g., current driver's license, motor vehicle records check, and verification of personal auto insurance)
- vehicle features and general driving safety tips (e.g., preventing distracted driving)
- rules regarding the transportation of passengers (e.g., which drivers are allowed to transport passengers and where)
- rules regarding the use of smartphones and GPS devices and CDs or radios while driving
- the nonprofit's auto coverage and which insurance will take effect in various vehicle accident scenarios (e.g., if a volunteer is driving a personally-owned vehicle versus if an employee is driving a vehicle owned by the nonprofit)
- what to do in the event of a vehicle accident (e.g., how to respond at the scene, when to move unharmed passengers to a safer location away from the road, when and how to report vehicle accidents to the nonprofit, etc.)
- when and how to use vehicle safety inspection and accident reporting forms
- requirements for recurring transportation safety training (e.g., repeated training every three years)

“...safety precautions may seem like common sense to an experienced or skilled worker, but they might not be obvious to workers or volunteers who are new to their job responsibilities and duties, or new to your workplace.

”

As you can see, even a single safety topic may require a significant amount of training to ensure that employees and volunteers can thoughtfully identify, reduce, and respond to hazards.

Ignoring Close Calls

One of the biggest mistakes organizations make when it comes to safety is failing to learn from past mistakes, incidents and near-misses. Too often, safety snafus are reviewed quickly and soon forgotten—or worse, incident reviews are completed just for the sake of ‘checking off a box.’ When incidents and near-misses aren’t subject to thoughtful review, a nonprofit forfeits the opportunity to make changes that will improve the organization’s safety record in the long term. Potentially even more harmful is when something *almost* goes wrong, but ends up being ok. In these types of situations, reporting and feedback is often overlooked for the sake of appearance—no one wants to admit they almost caused a serious incident. In reality, nonprofit leaders should encourage their teams to openly report and assess near-misses and incidents, because an in-depth analysis of what went wrong can the nonprofit reduce safety risks when planning future events and activities.

For example, a young volunteer is using a ladder to paint the walls of a new facility; she climbs to the top rung of the ladder and accidentally tumbles off. As soon as this incident occurs, it’s time to reassess the use of ladders and the ladder training provided to volunteers:

- Has this happened before? What actions did we take to improve ladder safety after prior events, and why were those actions ineffective today?
- What underlying conditions led to this risk event? (e.g., ineffective or nonexistent training provided to the volunteer, lack of supervision, the volunteer’s choice to ignore safety protocols, etc.)
- Was our volunteer properly trained in ladder safety, or did we assume she knew not to stand on the top rung? What additional training can we provide to ensure that a similar situation doesn’t happen again?
- What immediate response was taken after the fall? Was the response adequate?

Learning from mistakes, even when they don’t cause catastrophic results, is a characteristic of smart and resilient nonprofits.

Strategies for Enhancing Safety

Be Proactive

Resilient nonprofits invest in internal capacity and strive to set both proactive and reactive safety measures in place. Increase your focus on proactive measures that can both lessen the possibility that an unwanted risk event will occur, and also prepare your team to react appropriately if the event does occur. Make safety a priority for your organization by initiating the proactive safety practices below:

- Analyze specific risks associated with a position (like OSHA’s *job hazard analysis*)
- Re-train staff and volunteers when changes in duties and responsibilities occur
- Cultivate a sense of urgency and importance around incident reporting (to include the reporting and assessment of *close calls*)
- Institute program or department-wide safety assessments
- Provide training and support for recognizing unsafe practices and situations
- Develop and communicate clear and well-known procedures for emergency response
- Establish facility-specific standards and safety rules

The proactive steps that will work for your nonprofit depend entirely on the type of work you do, the clients you serve, and your staffing mix. Thoughtful orientation and ongoing safety training programs are key to supporting a proactive safety culture, as are supervision and practical safety policies.

Increase Interactions

Certain workplace safety issues stem from stress, or from a feeling of being disconnected from management or the organization’s mission. The simple strategy of increasing interactions between management and front-line staff can inspire a sense of connection to mission, and a sense that management care about the wellbeing of

employees. Senior leaders should also be comfortable admitting their mistakes and lessons learned, in order to inspire front-line staff to candidly report safety incidents and near-misses. Consider providing employees opportunities to openly talk about safety incidents or concerns, rather than relying only on paper or electronic reporting.

Just as important as providing appropriate safety training and opportunities for staff to submit incident reports, is providing feedback and follow-up after a safety event has occurred or an investigation has begun. If a new volunteer brings forth a concern about the lack of lighting in a facility entrance, don't let the conversation end there. Show appreciation that the concern was brought forward, and let the volunteer know what follow-up steps you will take to assess or address the concern. By encouraging these interactions, your team's safety awareness will grow, as will the level of comfort with reporting, assessing, and learning from safety incidents.

Cultivate a Safety Culture

Aim to bring considerations about safety into every decision made by your employees or volunteers. Whether it's safety risks involved with taking on a new age group of young service recipients, or safety risks involved with door-to-door fundraising conducted by volunteers, your team members should keep safety on their minds. If necessary, assign a team member to act as the 'safety advocate' to help initiate discussions about safety risks until such conversations become part of your culture.

The U.S. Department of Labor offers the following tips on creating a safety culture in the workplace:

- Make safety a norm and an expectation for management and front-line employees, as well as volunteers
- Shift management attitudes toward a focus on safety
- Ensure that organizational values reflect the importance of safety
- Adopt policies and procedures that specifically reference safety and important safety practices
- Take prompt action to rectify potentially hazardous situations or behaviors
- Train and motivate employees and volunteers to work toward the safest possible environment

Sometimes the best place to start is at the top, to achieve "buy-in" and support from management and supervisors. Once employee and volunteer leaders are on-board with the safety culture, others will begin to recognize the importance of safety at your nonprofit.

Periodically Reassess Your Approach

Remember to review and reassess your organizational approach to safety on a regular basis. Organizations grow, regulatory pressures shift, programs change, and staff and volunteers leave the organization for other opportunities. Nonprofit leaders must regularly review and revise their safety policies and practices in order to keep them relevant in the ever-evolving nonprofit sector.

One way to incorporate the reassessment process into organizational life is to think about adopting an "after-action review" process. An AAR typically examines an event (or a close call), the strategies currently in place for dealing with that event, the response to the event in the particular situation, and what changes or revisions can be made to make the process more streamlined and effective in the future (or to reduce the likelihood of recurring events in the future).

After an event occurs and immediate needs have been addressed, convene an AAR involving personnel who possess different perspectives on the event. Facilitate a discussion that addresses the following questions:

- What underlying conditions contributed to the occurrence of the event?
 - Which of these conditions were outside our control?
 - Of the conditions within our control, were there measures in place to reduce negative consequences arising from them?
- What immediate conditions contributed to the event?
- Was the situation or event acknowledged right away?
- Was the response appropriate in terms of personnel and equipment?
- Was the response executed appropriately?
- Were there any mistakes made in the response?
- Were the organization's policies and procedures followed?
 - Were any of the policies or procedures unnecessarily burdensome?

- What opportunities do we have to influence the occurrence of a similar event in the future?
- What changes should be made to improve responses in the future?

Although achieving a sustainable and resilient safety culture at your organization can be a challenge, the ability to protect lives of the clients you serve and the staff and volunteers that contribute to your mission makes the endeavor well worth the effort.

Emily Stumhofer was a Staff Attorney and Project Manager at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. The NRMC team welcomes your comments and questions about employee safety and the other topics covered in this article at info@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.