

Getting Managers More Involved in Incident Investigation

Author: Monica Kinsey



Introduction

During my time as a warehouse operations manager, I oversaw hundreds of employees. At the height of the pandemic, I had more than 170 direct reports across two departments. They were spread out across more than 300,000 square feet within the site. And that was just my team.

With an operation of this size, keeping workers safe had to be a collaborative effort between all departments. Because there were so many employees to look after, the EHS team often needed support completing thorough incident investigations. As a floor manager, I took part in everything from collecting witness statements to performing root cause analyses.

Sometimes, an incident would happen right at the end of my shift, and I would spend an extra hour or two helping collect evidence and recording the incident details. Of course, ensuring workers' safety was an immediate priority. But the rest of the investigation process often felt like extra work on top of productivity goals, process improvement projects, and any of the weekly tasks I needed to complete.

Like many of my peers, I knew the inputs of an incident investigation, but it took me a long time to learn how to do a high-quality one. Once I understood the role these investigations played in worker safety and operational improvement, they became something I wanted to be a part of—not just another request from the safety team.

Valuing Manager Input

Not only do managers report to senior leadership, but they also care for their employees and work with other departments to move the business forward. And they do all of this while working towards their own professional development goals.

If you're a leader who wants managers to care more about incident investigations, you have to show them how the process can improve their department's overall performance.

BENEFITS OF INCIDENT INVESTIGATIONS

Incident investigations are essential to preventing repeat accidents and injuries. But they're also useful tools for sitewide improvement, helping with things like:

- **Finding safety improvements that integrate seamlessly with existing operations**
- **Considering worker needs in the creation of new processes**
- **Improving safety training for workers, managers, and leaders**
- **Reducing the frequency of quality defects and process errors**
- **Creating a more comfortable and enjoyable workspace for all workers**

Use the incident investigation period to look beyond the benefits to worker safety and find new ways to improve your entire operation.



What helped me to get more involved was being a part of the brainstorming of solutions. When the safety team asked for feedback on a possible process improvement, I got to help them refine their ideas.

When there was a department injury, near miss, or accident, the EHS team at my site would come to the floor and speak with both myself and my workers to try and understand the process better. And that information allowed them to come up with improvements that interfered as little as possible with the elements of the process that were already working well.

Don't forget that managers have valuable input to share. They should be consulted on incident-related action items that affect the:

- Layout of their team's work area
- Steps in the process
- Type of equipment needed
- Best practices for worker safety
- 5S requirements
- PPE requirements

The easiest way to get managers more involved in the investigation process is to show them how these decisions are made following an injury or near miss. While the overall investigation is the responsibility of the EHS department, it can benefit from inter-departmental teamwork. But this is only possible if your process is relatively simple and easy to foster collaboration.

How to Simplify the Investigation Process

Having a complicated incident investigation process is one of the easiest ways to alienate managers. If it takes up too much of their time, managers will produce low-quality reports. And this will have a long-term impact on the operation.

If you're unsure where to make improvements, start by making a list of all the steps in your EHS team's investigation process. Include actions like:

- Collecting witness statements
- Reviewing video footage
- Following up with designated treatment facilities
- Taking photos of the scene
- Doing root cause analysis

Then, go through the list and add all the tools and resources (including people) that your team needs to complete each step.

Finally, estimate the amount of time each step takes.

After going through this process, you'll have a better idea of how complex your incident investigation process is. And you'll have an easier time simplifying it.

Below are my top recommendations for improving your incident investigation process so that managers are more engaged. Based on my time as an operations manager, these suggestions are designed to provide better support to managers who are already short of time.

With these improvements, you can produce better incident reports without over-complicating the process. And you might strengthen the EHS department's relationship with other teams throughout the site as well.

How to Assess Your Site's Incident Investigation Process

1

List out all the steps in your process.

2

Determine the tools and resources needed to complete each step.

3

Estimate the time that each step takes to complete.

Use this information to decide where you can eliminate steps, simplify the tools required, and cut down on the time it takes to complete each stage.

Encouraging Collaboration

For an operation to run well, all departments need to work together towards a common goal. Worker safety, among other operational goals, is easiest to achieve when you value the input of all stakeholders in a process change.

Encouraging collaboration across departments can look like:

- Asking managers about proposed changes to processes and systems
- Training all managers in workers' daily tasks and responsibilities
- Involving people at all levels of the business in safety walks and GEMBA meetings
- Holding regular meetings between different departments to discuss sitewide safety

At my site, the EHS team would always come to the floor and have the manager walk them through the process. They would ask questions about what the employee was trying to do when they got injured. This gave them more details to use in their incident reports.

Depending on how busy the EHS team was, they would often lean on managers to help write incident descriptions. And managers almost always had the opportunity (or responsibility) to provide a 5 why analysis of the event.

If you don't regularly involve managers in the investigation process, they won't see it as a benefit to their team's performance. This weakens the site's safety culture. And it ultimately treats quality and productivity goals as separate from safety initiatives. That's why collaboration can increase the effectiveness of any actions that come from an incident investigation.

Using a Digital Reporting System

A user-friendly investigation process is one that values managers' time. Using paper forms, emails, Excel and Word documents, and any combination of these approaches can ruin the experience.

At my site, we used EHS data management software to make, create, and update our incident investigations. This meant that I could help the EHS team from my work area instead of having to get on the phone or go to their office to provide my input. As a manager, I used the EHS software to:

- Upload photos to incident reports
- Write and record incident descriptions
- Give recommendations for next steps
- Create and complete action items
- Update investigation documents with new information/details
- Set timelines for the completion of action items

Due to the size of our operations, we really couldn't afford to not have a digital reporting system. We simply couldn't manage all the incident information by hand.

At the end of the day, having everything in a digital format saved me time trying to help the EHS team. And if the process had taken any more time, I probably wouldn't have wanted to be part of incident investigations at all.

Providing Helpful Resources

Many managers are go-getters, meaning they will teach themselves a good amount if given the right resources. Some of the best and simplest resources that helped me to improve my incident investigation skills were things like notes on incident descriptions that I'd written and easy-to-use 5 why templates.

Sending managers helpful resources when you come across them helps build a strong safety culture. It also sends the message that you're interested in their development and success—especially when it comes to safety initiatives.

Whether a blog post, a checklist, a form—I was always more motivated to do a better deep dive when I felt it was achievable. Having tools and resources helped me sharpen my investigation skills. And eventually I was able to use techniques that the safety team taught me for other areas like process and quality improvements.

All in all, I would say that doing incident investigations made me more aware of how safety impacted the health and performance of my team. And it also made me better at engaging with my team on safety-related topics. This helped me build a real relationship with the people under my care and developed a mutual respect that helped propel our department towards other operational goals.

But I wouldn't have gotten there without the EHS team's continuous support and involvement regarding the investigation process. Working together to understand incidents and come up with long-term solutions made me appreciate the role of thorough investigation. And at the end of the day, that's the kind of stance you want your managers to take towards safety as a whole.