

Safety – Just Common Sense? **Nonsense!**

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As a safety consultant I can't tell you how many times I've heard, "Safety is just Common Sense". It seems to be a perception by many that accidents are simply a result of individuals not applying a basic inherent awareness.

I wonder. If safety is common sense then why do over 110,000 die each year in the United States as a result of accidental death? I presume that these individuals simply lack that all important DNA strand for the common sense gene (Darwinism?). Maybe common sense isn't actually as "common" as we might suspect. And what exactly is common sense for that matter? Are we born with some type of innate hazard awareness?

In 1960 two development psychologists (Gibson & Walk) did a landmark study using a visual cliff. The "cliff" was a Plexiglas™ sheet between two solid surfaces. Infants were encouraged to crawl across the chasm. Even when coaxed by parents, they refused to cross the gap! Other studies have suggested younger infants don't have this ability. To the extent it is learned or innate is a question that will continue to be debated.

If we are provided with some innate awareness of hazards as infants, I believe that it is limited. Most of our common understandings of hazards come from experience and education. I have spent years studying various aspects of hazards and how they can be controlled. If safety was truly common sense, wouldn't it be a waste of time for universities to create degree programs in safety? After all, safety is just common sense!

Is it common sense not to enter a twenty-foot deep unprotected trench dug in sandy soil? Certainly, to most individuals in the construction industry we would claim this is common sense. But ask a newly graduated 18 year-old to enter this trench to retrieve a few tools. See what happens. (Actually, don't do that – it's not safe!).

Is it common sense that individuals working with methylene chloride must use a very specific type of protective glove to prevent skin absorption of this chemical solvent which is suspected of causing cancer in humans?

Is it common sense when a crane operator determines from his load chart that the jib boom will be overloaded if he attempts to move a load into a new position?

Is it common sense to know that testing the atmosphere in an empty tank is necessary prior to entry to assure safety? And that even if a confined space meter indicates that no hazard is present that serious atmospheric hazards may still be present?

Common sense is not common for all individuals. We each have individual experiences and training which develops our awareness and “sense”. Each of us has a different “sense” and perception regarding hazards.

What about the individual who stands on the top step of a ladder and leans over center to perform a task? Does this person lack “common sense”? -- Probably not. He may lack good judgment regarding the risk he is taking. This might be interpreted as a lack of “common” sense.

Next time you are tempted to say....”He just didn’t use common sense” following an accident, consider one of these two alternatives:

1) He wasn’t educated well enough to be able to recognize or appreciate the hazard.

OR

2) He made a bad judgment and took a risk that resulted in an injury.

One aspect that can help create more commonality of “sense” is training (More “common” sense). Training helps to establish some common knowledge. If everyone is properly and adequately trained in recognizing and avoiding safety risks, accidental injury and death can be avoided.

ABC offers various educational programs in safety. The OSHA 30-hour course is a basic cornerstone to understanding the safety requirements in construction. Many job sites are requiring individuals to hold an OSHA 30-hour card in order to be considered as a site safety monitor or to supervise a construction project.

Anyone with responsibility for supervising others or managing a construction site should have completed the OSHA 30-hour program. All trades persons on-site should attend an OSHA 10-hour class as a minimal educational requirement.

These programs are only a start to a complete education in safety which must be an on-going learning process in order to be effective. Statistically, construction is a hazardous business. Accidental losses can severely affect business profitability. Consider expanding the awareness and understanding of safety within your team by participating in the up-coming course. Let’s make safety sense as common as possible!