

A Snapshot in Safety and Risk

Safety Strategies for Housekeeping Employees

Housekeeping employees are prone to injuries due the physical demands requiring reaching, bending, stooping, lifting, and carrying, as well as exposure to cleaning agents. Without a proper safety program in place, injuries are certain to abound.

Trends in claims among housekeepers in the hospitality industry have steadily increased over the past decade, with muscle strains, sprains, and tears among the most common. While underlying risk factors may have a role in the severity of injuries, these types of incidents can be prevented by integrating programs that help organizations modify employee behavior, as the vast majority of occupational injuries are caused by unsafe work practices. Behavioral modification requires management to develop loss indicating metrics, identify safe work procedures, train staff to follow procedures, observe and coach employees, and monitor outcomes. The following will provide a brief introduction to a behavioral modification approach to safety with focus on housekeeping.

Consider Employee Behavior

Modifying employee behavior is critical to improving soft tissue injuries like strains and sprains, otherwise known as cumulative trauma (CT) incidents. CTs can be the costliest and most debilitating occupational injury employees experience. They occur over time and are the “downstream” result of an employee conducting work practices in an unsafe matter repetitively over a period. Preventing these injuries requires that the employer work with staff to modify work practice behavior. Fortunately, most housekeeping departments are structured in a manner that is a good fit for employers to implement a behavioral-based injury reduction process.

Loss Analysis

Loss analysis has been foundational in helping safety managers understand who, what, where, and when accidents occur within their organization for countless years. While there is value in loss analysis, it is used as a “downstream” or outcome measurement. Behavioral modification models are more focused on “upstream” measurements. Upstream measurements are those employee actions that result in or prevent losses “downstream”. For example, we understand that proper body mechanics are instrumental in reducing the chance of soft tissue strains when lifting. Behavioral models identify positive action, measure employee compliance with those actions, and train and coach employees to practice loss-preventing actions with anticipation that reduced strains will be the outcome “downstream”. To that end, the metrics and measurement paradigm has shifted. The behavioral model utilizes both downstream and upstream metrics. Both have value but the emphasis is on upstream measurements, i.e. employee safe work practices.

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Understand Positive Behavior

Hazards are present in every job, and some can be severe. As outlined above, loss analysis has a key role in determining which job titles have the highest injury and severity rates, as well as indicating that organizational efforts are producing desired results. In this case, we are assuming that housekeeping is the key loss driver. This holds true for many of our Tribal First clients. Our next step is to understand the behaviors that are leading to these losses. This requires employee observation. For the housekeeper, this would likely include observing actions including loading/pushing/pulling carts, bed stripping and turning, cleaning, vacuuming, dusting, etc. Simply observe staff and record what you see. Video can be very useful as you identify desired and undesired behaviors. By using video, you can sit down with select members of your team to identify criteria that you will eventually be observing and measuring. You will be amazed at how much can be missed while you are attempting to take notes without video. Fortunately, we all have smartphones with video capabilities, and it does not require an experienced or professional photographer.

It is also critical that you communicate and involve staff in the process. This will make your effort less intimidating and increase employee “buy-in”. After all, no one likes to be in pain. We all have a vested interest in preventing it.

Your observations should detail tasks, exposure, and prevention. We commonly refer to this as a job hazard analysis. However, as it pertains to behavioral modification, we are strictly focused on those employee actions that have the potential to lead to injury and highlight desired actions that prevent related injuries. We have provided a [JHA form](#) and an outline of [desired housekeeper behaviors](#) to help get you started. Please keep in mind that templates are a great place to start but rarely are they successfully implemented without modification to meet your application and management system.

Training

Once you have identified safe work behaviors and are prepared to begin a formal employee observation process you must communicate to and train your employees. There are numerous misconceptions about what and how individuals should be trained. Training can take on many forms. It does not have to be a professionally edited video that is observed in a classroom. Training can include video, infrequent interaction, coaching, and individual and/or group discussion. Additionally, training alone does not prevent workplace injuries. You read that right. Implemented training is the key to modifying employee behavior and reducing occupational incidents and injuries. With that, let’s look at a (3) phased training process.

1. Initial Team Training
2. Individual Coaching
3. Team Huddle Communication

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Initial training

During your initial training phase, the manager or trainer with the manager present, will provide an overview of the behavioral-based program purpose, an overview of the program being implemented, management expectations regarding compliance with the outlined work practices, and an assurance that the effort is not punitive. In other words, you will be focused on reporting positive attributes and outcomes without focusing on disciplinary action as the tool to drive desired behavior.

Individual Coaching

Individual coaching is another form of on-the-job training (OTJ). It requires that the individual observing an incorrect behavior work and remind the employee of the proper way they have been trained to perform a task or tasks. This is nothing more than a brief interaction and usually requires an interaction of less than a minute. It should go without saying that management will need to address staff differently that willfully ignores instruction or is observed repeating undesired behavior without heeding instruction. This rarely occurs with this safety model. Most employees grow to welcome positive feedback and coaching when necessary.

Optimizing Team Huddle

Most housekeeping departments have “huddles” prior to each shift. This is a perfect time to acknowledge positive behaviors and recognize employees for their contributions. The beauty of this approach is that it integrates the safety model into an existing management practice, optimizing time as it does not require additional meetings. You will likely also have to address areas for improvement if you see systematic non-compliance. Once again, the huddle is a perfect time to do this just as you would do if you observed poor quality work across the entire team. Regardless, this should be accomplished without “calling out” employees or embarrassing them in front of their peers. Simply state the area of improvement, the proper method of accomplishing it, and that there will be an increased emphasis on monitoring the respective area.

Lastly, the huddle is a great opportunity to periodically celebrate accomplishments by doing something unexpected—providing pastries or handing out a meal voucher—to express your gratitude and appreciation. There are other creative ways to recognize employees in the process. We will save this for another day. We do suggest that you avoid “incentive programs” as a fundamental component of any safety program as there is no direct correlation between incentive plans and sustainable safety improvement.

Implementing a Strategic Housekeeping Injury Prevention Program

Before diving head-first into a new safety program, first consider your organization’s goals, departmental roles, and responsibilities, how expectations are communicated, and what tools will be used to encourage compliance. Tribal First suggests that you establish a team that will include select lead and housekeeping employees and focus on a pilot group to test your

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program prior to organizational implementation. Once you “test” your efforts within the pilot group, program implementation will be much more seamless, and you will have a higher rate of success.

Think of the program as a turning wheel that makes continual progress as it moves forward. Listed below are five steps that outline the process:

1. *Establish Organizational Goals*: Perhaps reducing injury rates by 10% within the next 6 months and 15% for the year is your 2024 objective. Or maybe it’s achieving 95% completion on work evaluations for Q1 and Q2. No matter what your goals are, they should be measurable and achievable.



2. *Communicate Goals & Objectives*: All employees should be made aware of the measurement system and goals to help reduce injuries.
3. *Train Staff*: Supervisors and employees should be educated on the program and expectations. On-going/informal coaching and refresher training may need to be administered during daily huddles.
4. *Implement Risk Reduction Measures*: As a best practice, work observations should be conducted monthly by supervisors. This will aid in understanding and addressing work habits early on and avoid repetitive behaviors that may result in injury. Discussing the results with each employee will help in understanding what they did correctly and what they can do to improve.
5. *Monitor Outcomes and Adjust Program*: If your staff has received this program successfully, celebrate the milestone. Show appreciation and encourage employees to keep the momentum. Set new goals for the following quarter or year and repeat the process.

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Resources – Tribal First

[Hotel Worker Safety](#) – Safety Topic

[Ergonomics for Hotel Room Attendants](#) – Safety Topic

For additional information contact:

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