



Is safety common sense?

Belief leads to frustration among profession, regulators

How often do we hear in the workplace that safety is just common sense? If safety is common sense, then, to quote Mark Twain, "Common sense is not that common." If it were so common, there would be a lot fewer serious injuries and fatalities. In fact, it is well established there is no such thing as "common sense" and all such "sense" is actually learned.

In our evolving high technology world, many mourn the death of common sense. Minor safety incidents, serious disabling incidents and fatal incidents are often blamed on a lack of common sense. A comical obituary recently published in the *London Times* recounts the death of

common sense itself:

"Today we mourn the passing of a beloved old friend, Common Sense, who has been with us for many years. No one knows for sure how old he was, since his birth records were long ago lost in bureaucratic red tape. He will be remembered as having cultivated such valuable lessons as knowing when to come in out of the rain, the early bird gets the worm, life isn't always fair and maybe it was my fault. Common Sense lived by simple, sound financial policies (don't spend more than you can earn) and reliable strategies... Not many attended his funeral because so few realized he was gone."

The root of the idea of common

sense is that it is the basic understanding held by all "commoners" living in the commons (the land historically made available to the people for that purpose by the king or queen). Common sense is a basic ability to perceive, understand and judge things in a way that is common to nearly all people. It is something that can be reasonably expected of nearly everyone without any need for debate or question.

Implying that safety is common sense relegates it to those areas in our life that don't require much thought or close attention. It relegates it to a category of thinking we might call "mindlessness." I think it is fair to say we all know otherwise. When we treat safety as common sense we make it a mindless act. This is part of the reason the occupational health and safety profession struggles for legitimacy and why there is a constant sense of frustration in the profession itself and with the OHS regulators.

A modern-day movement linked to yoga and spirituality called "mindfulness" is related to the question of common sense. Mindfulness is all about keeping one's thinking current and doing things "mindfully." Mindfulness is closely linked to the idea of keeping "eyes on task" and "mind on task." It seems to me that mindfulness is, in part, the solution to the problem. Mindfulness is the opposite of common sense or mindlessness. Safety deserves and requires more than common sense; it deserves mindfulness.

A couple of factors affect something that may appear to be common sense: perspective and time. Common sense changes over time, and it is actually a learned behaviour. For example, a young child puts his hand into a cup of steaming water and is burned. Common sense will tell adults that if there is steam rising from a cup of water then it is hot, but because the child has not yet experienced this, he does not yet possess the required "common sense." Common sense is based on experience, education and training. Therefore, when it comes to working safely, common sense is only "common" when employees have an awareness and understanding of the risks associated with the work tasks and work conditions.

Safety will in fact become common sense when all employees are able to perceive risks when they arise, understand the consequences of exposure to the risks and make timely decisions to not tolerate any risk that is

inconsistent with the corporate risk posture. Considering this, we would say the majority of occupational health and safety practice is not common sense; rather, it is actually just good sense.

Good sense requires competence. About 80 per cent of industrial accidents are caused by unsafe acts on the part of employees — and not by unsafe conditions. The focus needs to be on building employee competence. The goal is not to develop common sense; rather, it is to seek competence. A "competent person" is one who is capable of identifying existing and predictable hazards in the surroundings or working conditions that are unsanitary, hazardous or dangerous to employees, and who has authorization to take prompt corrective measures to eliminate them.

Common sense doesn't become good sense until after an event. When we undertake an incident investigation after someone has been seriously injured or killed, we are looking back at the actions, behaviours and conditions of the event. When we inspect a workplace to identify unsafe conditions we are also, in effect, looking backwards to understand how or why work processes allowed these unsafe conditions to exist. Looking backwards we can see with perfect clarity — we often say hindsight is 20-20 — and in doing so, we are further developing competence. With the advantage of hindsight, things often seem clear because the pressures and stress of the everyday workplace do not cloud them. When we look back, we see things that are now obvious to us but were not obvious to those involved in the incident or in creating the unsafe condition discovered in the inspection.

Our employees are not born with good sense; they acquire it throughout their work lives through experience, education and training. Good sense can be learned from the experiences of others as well as our own, and can be taught in the classroom. Workers are in fact the best ones to prevent themselves from being injured. This is achieved by teaching them to recognize hazards, properly and thoroughly assess risks and implement appropriate controls. It is also achieved by communicating to them how others have taken risks and been injured or killed. That's good sense.

Glyn Jones is a partner at EHS Partnerships in Calgary and he provides program design and instructional support to the University of New Brunswick's OHS certificate and diploma programs. He is also the regional vice-president of Alberta, Northwest Territories and Nunavut for the Canadian Society of Safety Engineering. He can be reached at gjones@ehsp.ca.

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