Ensuring safe working practices

- Do you have defined methods for hazardous working practices?
- Does everyone follow these methods?
- Safe working practices ensure people perform tasks the correct way.

Do you do any cooking, either at home or as part of your work? Or have you watched any of the 'TV Chefs' at work? If you have, you'll know that preparing a successful meal involves four steps:

1. Choose the right equipment.
2. Choose the right ingredients.
3. Follow a recipe (or method) to mix the ingredients in the right proportions.
4. Process (or cook) the mixture to ensure that the final dish is safe, wholesome and appetising.

This is your recipe for safety and efficiency.

In your workplace you probably have to use the equipment which is provided for you. What’s more, you probably don’t have much influence over the ingredients (or materials) you use.
Ensuring safe working practices

However, you are involved all the time with the methods you and your team use and the processing of the materials. In other words, steps 3 and 4. These are the safe working practices which you must ensure are followed to put your organisation's workplace policies into practice.

A safe and healthy workplace is likely to be an efficient workplace too. Accidents can cause people harm. They can be painful, prevent people living healthy and happy lives. In the worst cases they can kill. But accidents also waste time as they need to be cleared up and investigated.

As well as causing injuries to people, accidents are also bad for morale, leading to absenteeism and increased staff turnover. They cost money too, through:

- lost production time;
- damage to machinery, materials and buildings;
- claims for damages and increased insurance premiums;
- fines imposed by the courts, in serious cases.

Read through this case study carefully to see how changes in the methods employed can lead to accidents.

Case Study

Martin worked in a modern food factory, running a line which packed powdered materials into packets ranging from 500 grams to 2 kilograms. His duties included keeping his own area tidy and cleaning the surrounding floor thoroughly at the end of his shift.

The floor was made of terrazzo (re-constituted marble) - and Martin found it hard to get clean with the scrubbing machine provided. Sometimes he had to work extra time, without payment. So, he brought in some strong cleaning fluid from home and used it on a small patch of floor to see if it would do a better job and save him some time. It seemed to make the floor look cleaner, so he asked his team leader, Mary, if he could change from the 'method statement' set out for his job. She said it would be OK for a trial period.

Two weeks later, a serious accident happened in a busy corridor near the packing hall. It had a wooden floor. An office worker, Amanda, slipped up whilst carrying a computer monitor. (Continued on page 3)
She fell, banging her head on the valve of a radiator and landed on the monitor. She suffered concussion, a sprained ankle and cracked ribs.

The investigation showed that:

- Amanda was not wearing safety shoes. Most people using that corridor did wear them.
- There had been several 'near misses' recently in the same area, all involving slips.
- Amanda had slipped on a sort of chalky deposit from the packing hall which had been brought in on the soles of people's safety shoes.
- The cleaner used by Martin had attacked the terrazzo and turned its top surface into a powder which attached itself to people's shoes.

In fact, Martin's actions had turned the wooden corridor floor into a cross between a dance floor and a skating rink!

### Exercise

Look at the following statements and tick the column which most nearly agrees with your opinion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>not sure</th>
<th>disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
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*Note: the list continues over the page*

1. If Amanda had worn safety shoes, she wouldn't have slipped.
2. Martin was simply trying to save his employer time and do a better job.
3. The method statement should have explained why the floor must be cleaned in the way it stated.
4. It was all right for Martin to change his working practice because he had cleared it with his team leader.
What are the right answers to the exercise? In many cases there are no absolutely certain answers, but there are some answers which are more likely to be right than others. You should find that the comments below help you to think more clearly about the right way to approach health and safety in your workplace.

In Martin's workplace, other people who were wearing safety shoes had 'near misses', so you can't be sure they would have saved Amanda (statement 1). However, it does seem clear that Martin was simply trying to avoid 'unpaid overtime' rather than save his employer time and do a better job. He should have discussed the problem honestly with Mary (statement 2).

The method statement should have explained why the job had to be done that way and what the risks were if unauthorised changes were made (statement 3). Even so, Martin has a personal responsibility to follow the job method statement until it is changed officially (statement 4).

Reporting 'near misses' every time they happen is certainly one of the best ways of preventing accidents, providing that the information is used and followed up (statement 5).

Mary should not have approved an unofficial change. As a team leader, she should have ensured that the laid down working practice was followed. If she thought it could be improved, she should have discussed her ideas with Martin and her manager (statement 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>disagree</th>
<th>not sure</th>
<th>agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>If the earlier 'near misses' had been reported, the accident could have been avoided.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mary was right to 'OK' the change in method.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Martin should not have used a substance brought in from home.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mary should have checked with her line manager if it was OK to make the change.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Ensuring safe working practices

No substance should be used in any workplace until it has been approved for use on the site. Otherwise, problems like the one Amanda had are very likely to occur (statement 7). That’s why Mary should have talked to her line manager. Had she done so, a safe solution to Martin’s problem might have been found or she could have explained to him why no change was possible (statement 8).

Many accidents involve slips, trips and falls. The causes are usually simple. They can be removed by tackling unsafe working practices and by ensuring that laid down safe working practices are adhered to. Many of them involve just the sort of safety issues which it is within your authority to do something about directly.

Your responsibility as a team leader

Think about the methods you use at work and the way that you and your team actually work. Do any of them, however minor, involve hazards or potential accidents? For example:

- working at heights (remember, people have been killed falling as little as ten feet [three metres]);
- work involving machinery or hot surfaces;
- work which can be affected by bad weather;
- working with animals;
- using hazardous substances, such as battery acid, bleach or pesticides.

These don’t have to be ‘official’ jobs. It could be that someone stands on a desk to open a window in the summer (working at heights) or you could have a coffee maker with a hot plate in the office. It may only snow once a year, but the yard outside becomes very slippery after a few people and vehicles have been on it and compacted the snow.

And don’t forget that some common materials may be hazardous if they are swallowed or allowed to remain in contact with the skin for a long time, no matter how small the chance of this occurring.

As a team leader, you must do your best to make sure your organisation’s safe working practices are applied all the time. You should take responsibility for blending the people, machinery, materials and substances in your workplace into a ‘recipe for safety’.
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You should lead by personal example, so that there is no excuse for your team to ignore or 'bend' the rules. Your role is to ensure that your team follow the laid down policies:

- within any laws that apply specifically to them; and
- within your organisation's workplace policies.

If you are unhappy with what is being done, or think a practice can be improved, then you should discuss it with your line manager or employer before you make any changes.

The case study showed clearly that things so often go wrong when people change working practices without realising what the risks may be. The changes may be made with the best of intentions, but that does not excuse them. Time and again, such unauthorised changes prove a recipe for disaster!
Complete the following exercises. Refer back to the session if necessary.

A. List five effects, other than direct injury to people, that accidents can have at work:
   1. 
   2. 
   3. 
   4. 
   5. 

B. Mark the following statements (T) True or (F) False:
   Your role in safety as a team leader includes:
   ___ 1. Setting a good example to all members of your team.
   ___ 2. Getting the job done as quickly and cheaply as possible.
   ___ 3. Keeping your team members happy at all times.
   ___ 4. Ensuring your team follow your organisation's laid down policies.

C. Complete the following sentence. Circle the letter in front of the answer.
   Accidents at work often result from:
   a. following safe working practices to the letter.
   b. cutting corners and making unauthorised changes to working practices.
   c. training people in safe methods of lifting and handling.
Making Connections

Think again about the methods you use at work and the way that you and your team actually work. You were asked if any of them involve hazards or potential accidents. Look again at the examples on page 5 and then complete the table below for up to three different working methods (official or unofficial) used in your workplace.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Working practice:</th>
<th>Is there an up-to-date written method statement? (Y/N)</th>
<th>Unauthorised changes which I know occur:</th>
<th>Any unsafe behaviour which results from these changes:</th>
<th>Improvements I believe could be made:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Working practice:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Working practice:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Working practice:</td>
<td></td>
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Think and Apply

How well do you use the skills in this session? Think about the way that you act when people in your team don’t follow laid down methods.

- Do you (and they) understand why they should follow these methods?
- If they could be changed, is there a procedure for changing methods?

1. Read the list of skills. Tick the boxes to show your strengths and weaknesses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>strengths &lt;-&gt; weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m good at this</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enforcing safe working practices and legal requirements within your team</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>looking for the risks in any changes in working practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>proposing improvements in working practices to your line manager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blending people, machinery, substances and working practices to assure safety in your workplace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Do you want to improve any of these skills?

3. How do you plan to improve the skills you listed in question 2? (You might want to discuss this with your line manager or your tutor/mentor/coach.)