

## **What Injury-Free Workers Can Teach Us**

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Much can be learned and gained from listening to the heartfelt and emotional stories communicated by “injured workers” who have sustained serious on-the-job injuries. I also believe the testimonials from what I call career “injury-free” workers can hold similar or greater value if we seek them out. Their stories don’t reach the headline news or radio channels. However, their testimonials non-the-less are very compelling and the attributes or characteristics injury-free workers possess can be learned and if personally put into practice on a daily basis will provide a pathway to achieving a similar injury-free outcome.

### **Testimonials**

#### Injured Workers

We all have read, heard or listened to personal stories or testimonials from workers who at one point in their working career sustained a serious injury on the job and in turn learned how it impacted not only their work and personal life, but the lives of their families, loved ones, work mates, friends and employers. We see through their emotional stories how their devastating injuries hold lasting effects long after the injury-producing event has taken place. Some injured workers are willing to share their story and lessons learned in hopes of preventing us and others from experiencing similar consequences.

#### Injury-Free Workers

At the other end of the spectrum are those individuals who have worked their entire career injury-free. I always wondered was it luck or something else that allowed such individuals to achieve this milestone in their life. Like injured workers, injury-free workers I felt would also have a similar compelling and powerful story to tell which all of us could learn from, but absent the tragic consequences.

### **Focus on Injury-Free Workers**

#### Ten Years Worth of Conversations

A single informal discussion I had back in 1997 with a thirty-five (35) year career “injury-free” maintenance worker in a manufacturing plant left me wanting to learn more about he and others like him as to what they believe caused this desired outcome. Something we all aspire for, an injury-free career.

Over the past ten (10) years I have attempted to seek out, meet and interview workers in many different industries who have worked their career injury-free. I defined, for the scope of my informal study, an injury-free worker as one who has not had a documented injury beyond simple first aid treatment. Whenever possible injury records, discussions with management (primarily employee supervisors, Human Resources & Safety Department Staff) and co-workers along with service/safety recognition awards were used to substantiate and verify injury-free status.

I have come across injury-free workers during my many visits to manufacturing facilities, construction job sites, warehousing operations, etc. to conduct such activities as safety management system audits, perform training, attend safety meetings, conduct design safety reviews and the like. I have met injury-free workers from both within my company as well as those external to my employer. Injury-free workers have held such job titles as machine operator, maintenance mechanic, service technician, construction laborer, delivery truck driver, warehouse forklift operator to name just a few.

Over the past ten (10) years I have had the opportunity to have in-depth interviews with close to fifty (50) “injury-free” workers. Their work experience to date has ranged from 15 to 50 years of injury-free work.

My interviews and discussions with these workers have not been formally structured or in any standardized format. These conversations are held in an informal “one-on-one” setting lasting anywhere from one to two hours in length. In some cases I make follow-up contacts with individuals to validate my notes and ensure I have captured their statements or comments accurately.

In most cases the discussions I have held with injury-free workers have taken place on the job site, in small meeting or conference rooms, at designated employee break or lunch rooms at their place of work or even in their homes.

## **Uncommon Attributes of Injury-Free Workers**

Based on my interviews and findings to date, it is clear to me that injury-free workers possess what I call key uncommon attributes or characteristics that differentiate them from the pack which has directly caused them to work injury-free during their entire working career. Achieving an “injury-free” career for these workers has not happened by accident. It was caused.

Webster’s Dictionary defines the words below:

Attribute - a characteristic or quality of a person or thing.

Characteristic - a distinguishing trait, feature or quality. The pattern of behavior or personality found in an individual. Suggest the indication of a quality that helps identify, something or someone. A quality or qualities that distinguish something from others of its class or kind, often implying excellence.

Uncommon - rare, not common or usual, extraordinary, remarkable.

## 10 Key Attributes of Injury-Free Workers

As my injury-free worker network grew, some uncommon attributes came to the surface I found associated with the personalities of injury-free workers. Not every injury-free worker displayed all ten attributes. Non-the-less, these were the characteristics that came through on a consistent basis.

### 1. Take Working Career Seriously

Injury-free workers take their working career very seriously. Their work is very important to them, even if it was unpleasant or difficult at times. Work is an important part of their overall purpose in life. They possess a strong work ethic. Their work was not viewed by them as a daily grind or a nuisance to outside activities, but rather a key focus and part of their overall daily living. They take personal pride and sense of ownership in the jobs they perform. Some cited many employees come to work tired or not motivated for the days work ahead. Injury-free workers come to work each day ready to provide a needed and value added service to their employer, which in-turn benefits them and their families. Injury-free workers believe if one cannot work, they can't have a productive and high quality of life.

### 2. 100% Responsibility

Injury-free workers take full responsibility for their personal safety, both on and off the job. A common message often heard was that it is fine that their company or employer is stressing safety, but they strongly believed in personal ownership in safety (taking care of #1). Injury-free workers don't abdicate their safety or well-being to anyone but themselves. They also believed in being there brothers-keeper. Looking out for their fellow employees ("especially the inexperienced and green folks") was something they take seriously as well.

Many injury-free workers can cite a specific "emotional story" in their life that has made them adopt a 100% Responsibility Mindset. One individual said he was a volunteer fire fighter and has seen lots of destruction and loss of life. One cited he gave CPR to a child, one cited a good friend died on the job due to an industrial incident, one cited he witnessed a fellow worker get seriously injured in his career while on the job, one cited an automobile accident they witnessed that "woke them up to increased safety awareness years ago". Injury-free workers don't give up their personal safety to anyone.

### 3. Plan for Safe Outcome

Injury-free workers plan for a safe outcome. Injury-free workers take the necessary time to plan for the job to be performed safely, especially when performing equipment and machine repairs. They never got in a hurry even when pressured to do so by others. Several indicated they "worked smart". One individual indicated they even have brought in their own equipment/tools in past years to use when they felt their workplace did not provide the right equipment. Injury-free workers have established a mindset that nothing they do at work is worth getting injured over. Injury-free workers think ahead and anticipate before acting.

### 4. Hazard Control Managers

Injury-free workers constantly focus on workplace hazards. Injury-free workers believe they must always have a general sense of their work surroundings and respect for it. Injury-free workers acknowledge that work should be considered inherently dangerous and one must always

be on guard for hazards and unsafe actions of others. Injury free workers spend time each day, cleaning up oil or grease on floors, improving housekeeping, keeping emergency exit routes clear, eliminating trip hazards, replacing guards, unblocking fire extinguisher stations, talking with others about safe work habits, reporting hazards to management. Injury-free workers are hazard control managers.

#### 5. Neat and Orderly Appearance

Injury-free workers have a very neat and orderly appearance and mindset. When you asked them about orderliness and cleanliness, injury-free workers prided themselves on a neat and clean work area (both at work and at home). Their tools, work area, storage locker and clothing appeared neat and orderly. Injury-free workers leave their work area clean and neat upon completion of their job or task. Most mentioned when they saw something out of order, or something left in the aisleway they would clean it up or remove it. One injury-free worker took me to his personal vehicle (pick-up truck) in the plant parking lot and showed me how neat his truck and storage box was. Injury-free workers are passionate about good housekeeping and maintaining a professional appearance. Injury-free workers demand cleanliness and order to their life.

#### 6. Avoid Complacency

Injury-free workers avoid complacency. They felt a big mistake with many employees who get injured, is that they take their work for granted and become complacent. Because they take their work seriously, injury-free workers rarely get complacent. They indicated they have observed complacency in both the experienced and new employees where they work. Injury-free workers can describe techniques they have created and apply daily to avoid the complacency trap. One technique described by one injury-free worker was developing a mindset that three triggering events would take place every single workday that could pose a danger to them which would discipline them to be watchful for such events to unfold and keep them from being injured. Another technique was to mix up their day with work activities which would not make the job appear routine and mundane. Injury free workers make each work day exciting and different to keep them alert and non-complacent. Injury-free workers view accidents as something that causes everyone to lose – themselves, their families, their co-workers and employer.

#### 7. Practice Safety Rules & Procedures

Injury-free workers value and abide by well established safety rules and work procedures. A majority of injury-free workers believe in sound and justifiable safety rules and procedures. Injury-free workers actively participate in establishing workplace safety rules and procedures. Many wore personal protective equipment beyond company requirements. Injury-free workers wear personal protective equipment off-the-job when working in the home work-shop, repairing their truck or car and mowing the grass, using a chain saw or operating power tools, etc. Injury-free workers view following safety rules and safe work procedures as an obligation to not getting injured. Injury-free workers viewed practicing sound safety rules and safe work procedures each day as “a prescription” to an injury free career.

#### 8. Positive Attitude & Outlook

Injury-free workers have a very positive attitude and outlook which extends to their family life, employer, co-workers and workplace safety in general. Injury-free workers indicated their employers were doing their part in safety, and that it was up to all employees to work safely and follow the rules and keep their mind on the job at hand. Injury-free workers viewed safety as a

positive influence in their life in that it would permit them to return home safely to their families each day. Injury-free workers enjoy life and viewed safety as helping them keep theirs intact.

### 9. Applied Safety Knowledge

Injury-free workers believe safety training was important, should be taken seriously and applied to one's job. They all stressed safety programs should be easily understood and simple to implement. They believe safety training should be offered on a continuous basis and kept interesting and new. They felt safety had to be on workers' minds constantly. Some mentioned they had taught safety topics at the plant or workplace, or even were instructors outside the plant (fire department, CPR instructor, technical college, etc.). Several cautioned, not letting safety training become stale, but to keep it fresh and interesting to keep it effective and remembered. Injury-free workers could clearly cite the safety training they had received in the previous months and how it applied to their work. Injury-free workers viewed participating in ongoing quality safety training as a pre-requisite to an injury-free career.

### 10. Safety as a Value

Injury-free workers have safety as the central theme of their life. Safety is not an 8 to 5 thing with injury-free workers. It was very clear that safety was a value in their life. They practiced safety both on and off the job. Some employees indicated they had taken CPR classes off the job for the benefit of their family, they stressed seat belt use while driving a motor vehicle, use a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) on power tools at home, safe storage of chemicals away from their children, smoke detectors and fire extinguishers in the home, and firearms locked up and not loaded.

It was evident these people could not be easily swayed to take short cuts or compromise safety rules. In fact some injury-free workers mentioned they were always counseling employees and supervisors on safer work methods and or coaching the less experienced employees. A common theme is that these experienced workers would not allow someone else or external elements to pressure them into doing something "stupid" or be "rushed". Several indicated they would even "push back" if necessary if they felt the work assigned to them was not safe or given the proper time to perform the work safely. On frequent occasions, injury-free workers mentioned the constant newspaper articles or TV coverage they see on almost a daily basis that always talked about "accidents" (on and off the job) and how this should not be.

What is also interesting, when I have spoken to others (employees or supervision) at the plant or facility about a specific injury-free worker, they all indicated these individuals are productive employees and ones they count on day to day to get the job done. Injury-free workers have good documented job performance and minimal absenteeism. Injury-free workers are not "attention getters". Injury-free workers perform their daily work without much fan-fare.

## **Call to Action**

You may want to seek out and talk with some of your career "injury-free" workers within your respective organization. You might find similar feedback to your questions and even some new patterns of thought/behavior. The key attributes and lessons learned from the injury-free workers at your facility should be shared with others. Much can be learned from these individuals. They have many stories to tell, if only asked to do so. Within our individual places of work lie true

safety champions. Let your injury-free workers show you how to take your safety performance to the next level.