Workplace Learning System

Weekly Safety Briefings

Week 12 – Monday, March 16 – Friday, March 20, 2026

Drift Into Failure

INTRODUCTION

Most workplace incidents do not happen because someone intentionally breaks a rule. More often, they occur after small changes in how work is performed slowly move us away from the way tasks were originally designed to be done safely. Over time, these small adjustments can become the new "normal," even if they introduce additional risk.

This process is known as **drifting into failure**. It happens gradually as people adapt to everyday pressures like deadlines, production demands, equipment issues, or the desire to make work easier and faster. Because these changes often appear harmless and may even improve efficiency in the short term, they can go unnoticed until a serious incident occurs.

This week's safety brief will explore how drift develops, why it happens, and how teams can recognize and address it before it leads to injury, equipment damage, or operational disruptions. By understanding the conditions that allow drift to occur, supervisors and team members can work together to identify small deviations early and realign work practices with safe and reliable processes.

Recognizing and correcting drift is not about blame. It is about learning how everyday work happens and making improvements that help everyone perform their jobs safely and successfully.

MONDAY - What Is Drifting Into Failure?

Supervisor Overview

Today introduces the concept of **drift** - how routine work slowly shifts away from intended safe practices. Help your team recognize that drift doesn't happen overnight; it's the natural result of small decisions that "feel" harmless.

Why This Topic Matters

The most serious incidents rarely come from one big mistake. They come from a series of minor changes that gradually erode safety margins. Understanding drift helps us spot small deviations before they become major risks.

Real World Example

On a busy Monday morning, the packaging department is running behind after a long weekend shutdown. The line is loud, and workers typically wear hearing protection. One operator steps away from their station for a few minutes and forgets to grab new earplugs when returning. It's only supposed to be a quick reset, just two minutes.

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Nothing happens. No hearing discomfort. No one notices.

By mid-week, the operator occasionally goes without earplugs during short tasks because “it’s fast” and “I’m not here long enough for it to matter.” Other team members start to see this as normal. Weeks later, during an extended troubleshooting task, the same operator works unprotected long enough to cause ringing in their ears after the shift.

The drift wasn’t dramatic. It started with one harmless-seeming moment that slowly became the new norm.

If this operator continues to not wear hearing protection, the ringing in the ears will happen regularly, until one day the operator’s hearing is permanently damaged.

Key Points

- Stopping drift requires fixing the conditions that caused it, not blaming people.
- Encourage reporting of workarounds without fear.
- Re-align “how we work” with “how we should work.”
- Supervisor and team member modeling is critical; people follow what leaders do; and, when Team Members own safety and create workplace norms, the team will adapt to those norms.
- Drift correction is an ongoing practice, not a one-time fix.

Discussion Questions

- What is one drift-related issue we can fix as a team next week?
- How can supervisors make it easier for employees to speak up about drift?
- What system or process changes would reduce the pressure to drift in the first place?

TUESDAY - Why People Drift

Supervisor Overview

Today we explore WHY drift happens. It’s not about bad attitudes or carelessness, drift is often a rational response to real pressures workers face.

Why This Topic Matters

If we understand the pressures that cause drift, we can address those pressures at the source instead of blaming workers. This helps build trust and reduces repeat patterns of unsafe behavior.

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Real World Example

On a filling line, a photo-eye sensor intermittently stops production. Maintenance knows about it but hasn't had time to replace the part. Operators are under pressure to meet the day's order quantities, and the sensor fault trips frequently.

To "keep things moving," an operator places a small strip of tape over the sensor so the beam stays aligned. The workaround seems harmless. The line runs smoother, numbers improve, and supervisors appreciate the lack of downtime.

Over the next month, every shift uses the tape trick. Eventually, the sensor stops detecting a jammed container, causing a spill and a small equipment fire due to product buildup near a heated element.

Drift happened because the workaround made life easier and nothing bad happened until it did.

Key Points

- Drift is driven by real-world pressures like deadlines, quotas, and equipment issues.
- Workers often drift because they're trying to "help" not because they want to break rules.
- Production pressure can unintentionally reward unsafe shortcuts.
- Processes that are inefficient or frustrating naturally invite workarounds.
- Drift thrives when hazards are low-visibility or the payoff (speed/productivity) feels immediate.

Discussion Questions

- What pressures in our work environment encourage shortcuts?
- Have we ever unintentionally rewarded unsafe speed?
- What equipment or processes push people toward workarounds?

WEDNESDAY - How Drift Hides Itself

Supervisor Overview

Today focuses on the invisible nature of drift. Workers rarely realize they've drifted because the changes feel small and often lead to successful outcomes, until they don't.

Why This Topic Matters

Hidden drift is dangerous because it creates a false sense of security. If we don't see the drift happening, we can't intervene early. Recognizing early indicators helps prevent incidents.

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Real World Example

A forklift operator must move pallets from the warehouse to the production floor multiple times a day. The official route is clearly marked but requires navigating around two structural columns. It adds about 20 seconds to each trip.

One day, rushing to help production catch up, the operator cuts across an open space between storage racks to save time. Nothing is damaged, no one is nearby, and the shortcut feels efficient.

Over the next few weeks, more operators adopt the same path. Supervisors don't notice because productivity has improved. The shortcut becomes the unofficial standard.

Months later, during a rare audit, the safety team realizes the shortcut crosses a pedestrian walkway that's usually empty, until the day it isn't. A near-miss occurs when a sanitation worker rounds the corner unexpectedly.

The pattern had slowly drifted from safe to unsafe without anyone realizing it.

Key Points

- Drift becomes invisible because "success" reinforces the shortcut.
- People adapt to broken, slow, or inconvenient systems without realizing it.
- Teams gradually redefine what "normal work" looks like.
- Supervisors may miss drift if the end result (production output) still looks good.
- Drift hides in habits, especially those we don't question anymore.

Discussion Questions

- What tasks on our team have unofficial "new ways" of being done?
- Can we think of a shortcut that has become so normal we barely notice it?
- What signs tell us drift may be happening in our area?

THURSDAY - Detecting Drift Early

Supervisor Overview

Today we identify the early warning signs of drift so the team can recognize and correct it before it leads to an injury or equipment damage.

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Why This Topic Matters

Early detection prevents incidents. Once drift becomes the "new normal," it's harder to fix and more dangerous. Identifying drift early allows for simple, proactive improvements.

Real World Example

A press operator frequently clears small material jams. To do this by the book, they must lock out the press, remove the guard, clear the jam, reinstall the guard, verify it's latched, and restart the machine. It's a 10–12 minute process.

Because many jams require only a quick adjustment, the operator starts leaving one side of the guard unlatched. The guard still "looks" closed, and nothing bad happens. Over time, several coworkers adopt the same practice.

One day, during a jam that requires deeper reach, the guard shifts slightly. A coworker's finger enters the danger zone as the press cycles, resulting in a serious hand injury.

Everyone is shocked, but the drift had been building for months, hidden behind good intentions and repetitive success

Key Points

- Early indicators include makeshift fixes: tape, wedges, zip ties, bypasses.
- Procedures that "nobody follows" are red flags for drift.
- PPE skipped for "quick tasks" often signals growing complacency.
- Frequent small deviations reveal system issues, not worker flaws.
- Drift detection requires open conversation, not blame.

Discussion Questions

- What drift warning signs have we seen recently?
- Are there tasks where PPE or safeguards are skipped "just briefly"?
- What barriers prevent us from bringing up drift when we see it?

FRIDAY - Stopping Drift and Resetting Safe Practices

Supervisor Overview

Today we close the week by focusing on how we can stop drift and rebuild safe, reliable work practices together.

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Why This Topic Matters

Stopping drift isn't about discipline; it's about understanding why drift happens and fixing the system problems that create it. Teams that tackle drift collectively create safer, more consistent operations.

Real World Example

A pallet wrapper has a safety gate designed to stop the machine if someone enters the wrap zone. Over time, the gate hinge wears out, causing it to catch and occasionally trigger a stop even when no one is inside the zone.

Instead of submitting a repair ticket (which historically takes days), operators wedge a small piece of cardboard under the latch to keep it from sticking. It's meant to be temporary, but it works so well that every shift starts doing it.

Eventually, the gate can no longer stop the machine when someone enters the area. During a cleaning operation, a team member steps in while the wrapper is still in motion, resulting in a close call and damaged equipment.

When the issue is finally addressed, operators openly admit:
"If the gate didn't fight us every day, we wouldn't have used the workaround."

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Discussion Questions

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- What system or process changes would reduce the pressure to drift in the first place?