



MANAGING PRACTICAL DRIFT

What is the problem?

Each year, workers are injured or killed and post incident investigations have often led to the identification of human factors (i.e., human characteristics that influence behavior) as contributing to the cause of the incident. In these cases, workers may have failed to follow safety procedures and/or did not use safety equipment that could have either prevented the incident from occurring or lessened the extent to which they were injured.

What is it that leads workers to engage in behaviors that are not safe? One explanation is by a process known as **Practical Drift** which is described as, “**the slow uncoupling of practice from procedure.**” The following are some of the reasons why *Practical Drift* can occur:

- Bad habits, (i.e., “we’ve always done it this way”)
- Seasoned workers relying on experience rather than written procedures
- Changes in procedure without authority
- Over-confidence
- Complacency
- Belief that working faster is appreciated
- A lack of belief in “safety first”
- Employees lacking knowledge or necessary skills
- Expediency, (i.e., a belief that work is done faster when corners are cut)
- Competition to outperform other employees
- Defiance, attitude, and/or emotions
- Lack of focus
- Laziness

What can be done about Practical Drift?

1. Engage employees in a manner that could lead to a more profound sense of mindfulness in their work.
2. Increase safety awareness through conversations and dialogue with and between all levels, from senior leadership down, through and including every employee.
3. Engage employees at all levels in conversations about Practical Drift. Employees must be educated and made aware of *Practical Drift* if they are to identify, understand and be willing to address it when it occurs in themselves and others.
4. Take time to build quality relationships in the workplace across all levels.

Theory to Practice

The theory of *Practical Drift* emerged from Colonel Scott A. Snook’s root cause analysis of the 1994 friendly fire accident in which two U.S. Air Force F15 fighter jets patrolling the No-Fly-Zone over northern Iraq shot down two U.S. Army Black Hawk UH-60 helicopters. Twenty-six peacekeepers lost their lives in this incident. The Colonel concluded that the tightening of procedures or the increasing of penalties for failure would inevitably fail as new procedures would eventually be ignored also. Regulators try to control the behaviors that emerge from *Practical Drift* through regulations and enforcement, but human nature is not always responsive to that approach. The practice of following proper procedure – every time, and continuous education is the best way to ensure that incident risk is mitigated.