

DC Metro and the Culture of Safety

By Byron A. Ellis – February 01, 2010



It is imperative to improve the safety record of the Washington DC transit system. The system has suffered a string of worker and passenger injuries and fatalities. Often organizations with safety problems are plagued by internal systemic issues that can only be solved by improving internal administrative capacity.

Robust internal operating processes can prevent accidents. Accidents are preventable; they occur because appropriate safety processes are not in place.

The recent accident in which two workers died was indeed preventable. According to the [Associated Press](#), the workers, Sung Oh and Jeff Garrand were installing safety equipment on the track closed to regular service when a reversing vehicle hit them. They also noted that a near-miss occurred the previous month to a team of inspectors. Near misses require job safety analysis review, which would implement steps to prevent reoccurrence.

The [Washington Post](#) reported that none of the four workers in the reversing vehicle were injured. Thus, it appears that the reversing vehicle failed to use a flagman (banksman), which is a designated person whose task is to assure the reversing area is free of obstacles. It appears that DC Metro did not equip the reversing vehicle with automatic audible reversing alarms or visible flashing lights. In every work environment, reversing alarms should be an integral part of movable work equipment.

Thus, it is easy to conclude that operational safety considerations, safety training of supervisors and workers were lacking. For instance, aside from closing the tracks, the lockout of the work area should have occurred. A lockout mechanism would not permit vehicle access to the work area. And, there should be a written lockout procedure authorized by Metro supervision.

Many private organizations and governments institute robust safety reversing vehicle procedures that prevent injuries. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) of the United Kingdom (UK) notes in [Reversing Vehicles](#) that nearly a quarter of all deaths involving vehicles at work occur while the vehicle is reversing. As a result, they issued Workplace Transport Safety: An Employer's Guide HSG136.

By law in the UK ([Workplace Transport Safety](#)), employers must protect the health and safety of their employees and ensure that members of the public are not put at risk because of the work that they do.

The Washington Metro system has had several unacceptable injuries and deaths in the past four years. On June 23, 2009, [ABC News 7](#) reported that nine passengers were

killed and 76 injured when a Metro train slammed into the back of a stopped train on the Red Line.

Injuries and deaths are unacceptable in any organization when they result from systemic problems due to inadequate organizational capacity. Reduced organizational capacity starts at the highest level of an organization. Thus, it is paramount for Metro Board to infuse itself with experienced personnel from private industries where safety is paramount, such as the chemical and petrochemical industries. The organization's culture of safety starts at the highest level of organizations.

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