

Building Failures Forum

A Failure (and Success) Information File

by Raymond A. DiPasquale



It's typical to start each new year with a pledge to avoid all the things we did wrong last year, and to make a list of the many new ideas we've come across that we'd like to try out in the months ahead—ideas that could help us do a better job and maybe even bring in some more money.

Avoiding past mistakes is a noble objective—we all want to do that! The trouble is that in our business the potential for errors is so great that it's difficult to keep track of them.

So if any resolution that purports to reduce errors in our work is to have any teeth, there needs to be a "system" or an "environment" in which it can take place.

Because the building process is so complex and there are so many people involved in it, errors can creep into the system in many ways. The important thing is to recognize a mistake when it happens and to *communicate* the lessons learned from it to future generations.

This requires not only complete documentation of the incident, but more importantly, a filing and retrieval system that will be effective enough to ensure ongoing referral. So if you're *really* serious about reducing costly mistakes, you'll set up a system to keep track of them.

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Keep in mind that you do not necessarily want limit your files to *failures*, or even to the mistakes that you yourself have made. There's a lot to be learned about *avoiding* failures in the first place—starting, for example, with the articles in *NEB*.

If someone explains how to guard against buckling floors or properly reline a chimney, jot down the essential information as outlined below and file it away in the appropriate category.

This being said, let's move on to the system itself.

The Simpler the Better

As is usually true of anything in life, simple systems always work best. If your reporting forms are elaborate, they won't be filled out. If the filing and retrieval methods are complicated, they won't be used. In short, the idea will go the way of many other well-meaning resolutions.

With this in mind, here's a step-by-step guide to a simple information system that can work for you—and maybe even keep you out of the courtroom.

Like all successful ventures, someone has to be put in charge. Assign a key management person to be the "safety" officer.

This is the person who will write up the incident and be responsible for filing and follow-up. This is also the person who will be reading all the news magazines to clip pertinent articles and features. (These clippings, in fact, will make up the bulk of your files.)

Design a simple reporting form on which your own incident or the incident taken from the news media can be recorded. A standard sheet of typewriter paper will do fine.

On the front, divide the page into three sections: the problem, background data, and the cause of the problem.

On the back side, divide the page into four sections: the fix, how to avoid (a checklist), the lessons to learn, and references (attach clippings or state references where more information can be found).

On one sheet, then, you will record all the essential information in a nutshell. The write-up can be simple and in just enough detail so that someone can pick it up later and learn the key issues involved.

When you think about it, even the most complex incident can be summarized in just a few sentences. It is this conciseness that you're after. Don't clutter up the file with copies of engineering reports and the like—they are part of the references that are filed somewhere else and used by those who really want more detail.

The key thing is the *nature of the problem and the lesson to be learned* so that you won't make the same mistake again or repeat the misfortune of one of your colleagues.

In the upper right-hand corner of the front side, put a small box. This is where the "safety officer" will note, in large letters, a key word that categorizes the problem or failure (for example, steel, concrete, masonry, wood, etc.). I use the Construction Specifications Institute format; *Sweets* file categories are the same.

Next, set up separate file folders for each of these categories, and the system is complete.

As you collect the information either from your own experiences (not too many, I hope!) or from magazines and newspapers, fill out the forms and keep them in the file folders. At the rate we're creating "incidents" in our industry, it shouldn't take long to fill up your file.

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But it's not enough to have the best and most complete filing system on the block. The idea is to *learn* from it—and that means you need a follow-up system that retrieves the information on a regular basis.

The mind needs constant refreshment. New personnel need constant education. If the information doesn't get down to the person at the end of the hammer, you haven't got a "failure information system."

How do you do this? The safety officer schedules "brown bag" lunches every month with *everyone* present, at which you go through the file and cover one or two cases per session or bring in an expert to give a mini-seminar on a particular problem.

In short, you develop a "failure prevention attitude" that permeates every member of the team—which also has the unbeatable side effect of helping you do a better job. •

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