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Fortuna is not the goddess of OHS professionals!

One windy day, my friend Peter was walking along one of the main streets in town when he passed beneath a balcony. The geraniums belonging to the lady on the first floor chose this exact moment to break free, powered by the wings of Aeolus, and fall at the feet of my unfortunate companion. "What luck!" he exclaimed, looking up to the offending balcony, while hurrying along to join our colleagues on the other side of the street.

On hearing his exclamation I could not help but think of the "we were lucky(1)" (good luck) or "it had to happen" (bad luck) that are sometimes mentioned in the analyses of near-misses in industry. Unfortunately, we see that in some investigations these two ways of thinking can cut short the search for the root causes of the situation. Consequently, the company lacks any real feedback, which all helps to build the reputation of Lady Luck.

Leave tragedies to Greek philosophers

In ancient times, the tragedies recounted by philosophers centred on the notion of inevitability(2), which they distinguished from fatalism(3). This way of thinking assumes that a part of what we do is beyond our control. Consequently, and even today, there is no doubt that some of your teams will develop the belief that incidents and accidents are partly due to bad luck.

This is known as the 'fatalistic' culture. It becomes a breeding ground for the normalisation of deviations from procedures, unacceptable risks that become acceptable or ongoing degraded working conditions. Typically, and to top it all, 'fatalistic' employees feel they are already doing everything they can to prevent accidents, and that it is the job of managers to improve safety. Of course 'fatalistic' managers think the opposite. All of this creates a feeling of helplessness, with the impression that they are the victim of safety rather than

Accidents are not due to good or bad luck

its creator. Fortunately, this attitude is only found in some of the company's staff. However it undermines efforts to improve risk management - this is how the rot sets in!

« There is no doubt that some of your teams will develop the belief that incidents and accidents are partly due to bad luck.. »

The fight against fatalism never ends

So, if in the coming months you are involved in an incident analysis or audit and you hear a fatalist using one of their favourite expressions(4), do not ignore it, and do not accept the situation because you lack time or energy. If you do, you too will become part of the vicious circle of fatalism!



Use your ability to involve your audience and deepen the investigation or the search for solutions. Encourage each actor to move towards an integrated safety culture(5), as described in the work of Professor Marcel Simard. In short, never give up fighting for the idea that accidents have a rational explanation, and that it is therefore possible to take action to avoid them.



Notes

1. For example, "We were lucky there was nobody nearby when the explosion happened", or "We were lucky that someone passing by happened to see the leak".
2. The natural reaction when faced with the inevitable power of destiny.
3. The natural reaction when faced with chaos caused by chance or luck.
4. Some examples of fatalistic ideas : "it wasn't so bad", "that didn't happen by accident", "nothing could be done", "we can't do any better at the moment", "we already asked a dozen times but still nothing", "we've been trying to do something about the situation for a long time", "there's no point in asking - the bosses don't want to do anything"
5. Daniellou, F., Simard, M. & Boissières, I. (2011). *Human and organizational factors of safety : state of the art*. Les cahiers de la sécurité industrielle, 2011-01, Foncsi, Toulouse, France.