

What Can I do? I'm Just the Operator.

A frequent comment from workers is, "What can I do to improve the safety of our processes? I am just the operator (or technician, mechanic, etc.). I just turn valves, operate the equipment, take samples, turn wrenches, adjust the equipment." It is true that operators and maintenance people can't change the chemistry, redesign equipment, or change materials of construction. However, they have the best view of the process. They know how it behaves, how equipment fails, and under what conditions the process runs best.

Yogi Berra was a baseball player who said, "You can observe a lot by watching." That is true of process safety. You can learn a lot by looking and listening. Unusual sounds may indicate an impending equipment problem. A dirty or wet spot on the floor or piping may warn of a small leak. We all know equipment problems and leaks do not fix themselves. Report what you see, write a repair order, or tell your supervisor.

The pictures show examples of problems you might observe in your plant.



▲ Could you open or close this rusty valve?



▲ The dust on this motor provides fuel for a fire and may be a dust explosion hazard.



▲ A rusty, leaking pipe.



▲ Is something leaking from this flange?



▲ Look for electrical and wiring problems.



▲ Bolts missing from a flange.

What Can You Do?

- Understand your process and equipment. Know how it is supposed to work, and how to recognize when it is not working properly.
- Be alert to things that are different – noises, smells, drips, leaks, vibration. If something doesn't seem right, tell somebody!
- Fill out inspection sheets accurately. Even if a problem has been on the sheet for months, make sure it is noted again and point out to your supervisor how long it has been a problem.
- Promptly report safety concerns – for example, missing guards, bolts, or pipe hangers can cause serious injury or lead to a spill, fire, or even a major catastrophe.
- Use crew meetings and safety meetings to raise safety concerns, and listen when others voice their concerns.
- Do your part. For example, when asked to review operating procedures or proposed changes, do it as if your life depends on it. It may.

Process safety depends on everybody!

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