

Weekly Safety Briefings

Week 40 – Monday, September 28 – Friday, October 2, 2026

Working Alone

Introduction – Working Alone: When There Is No One There to Help

Introduction for Leaders:

This week we are talking about working alone. It is one of the most common situations in any industrial, maintenance, or manufacturing environment and one of the least formally addressed. Team members who operate alone, whether during off-shift maintenance, early morning startups, remote area work, or simply when everyone else steps away, face a specific set of risks that do not exist when the crew is together. The biggest one is not the hazard itself. It is that when something goes wrong and there is nobody else there, the response time to get help is entirely dependent on whether anyone knows something happened.

This week is about understanding the unique risks of working alone, building habits that reduce them, and making sure that every person on this team who ever works alone has a plan before they start, not after something goes wrong.

How to Frame This Week:

- Think about your specific operation. Who works alone regularly on this team? What tasks, what shifts, what locations? Name them specifically this week.
- Monday carries the weekly challenge. Check in mid-week and use Friday for the report-back.
- Be honest about whether your facility currently has a formal lone team member plan. If it does not, this week is a good starting point for building one.

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Monday – What Makes Working Alone Different

Discussion:

Most of the safety controls we rely on every day are built around the assumption that there are other people around. A team member who sees a near-miss and says something. A teammate who notices you have been gone too long. Someone nearby who can call for help the moment something goes wrong. When you are working alone, every one of those controls disappears. The hazards do not change. The response system does.

This is not a reason to avoid working alone. It is a reason to approach it differently than you approach work when others are present. A task that is low risk with a crew may carry significantly higher risk when performed alone, not because the task changed but because the recovery system did. A minor injury that would be handled in minutes with team members nearby can become a life-threatening situation when there is no one to call for help and no one who will notice you are not where you are supposed to be.

The specific risks that increase when working alone:

Delayed emergency response. If something goes wrong and you cannot call for help yourself, or if you lose consciousness, the time before anyone realizes something has happened may be measured in hours rather than seconds. In a medical emergency, that delay can be fatal.

No second check on judgment. When you are alone, there is no one to question a decision that looks wrong, catch a step you are about to skip, or say something feels off about this. The check-and-balance of a second set of eyes disappears entirely.

Increased tendency toward shortcuts. Research consistently shows that team members are more likely to skip steps, bypass controls, and take risks when no one is watching. This is not unique to any individual. It is a documented human pattern. Accountability to others changes behavior in ways that accountability to procedure alone does not.

No help with physically demanding tasks. Tasks that are manageable with assistance become hazardous alone: handling heavy or awkward loads, working at height without a spotter, managing a stuck valve or a jammed machine without a second person to monitor or assist.

Weekly Challenge:

This week, identify every situation in your regular work where you are alone or effectively alone: tasks where there is no one nearby who would know quickly if something went wrong. Note what the task is, where you are, and what your current plan is if something happens. Bring that to Friday.

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Tuesday – Tasks That Should Never Be Done Alone

Discussion:

Not all solo work carries the same risk. Running a routine machine cycle while the rest of the crew is on break is different from performing maintenance on energized equipment in a remote part of the facility at 5 a.m. The risk is a combination of what the task involves and what happens if something goes wrong while no one is present. Today we are going to name the tasks that sit at the high end of that scale, where the combination of hazard severity and response delay makes working alone genuinely unacceptable.

Tasks that should require a second person or a formal check-in system:

Any permit-required confined space entry. This is an absolute. Confined space fatalities disproportionately involve would-be rescuers who entered without protection. An attendant outside the space is not optional. It is the control that makes rescue possible.

Energized electrical work. Working on or near energized equipment alone removes the person who would call for help if a contact occurred, and it removes the second qualified person that high-voltage work specifically requires. Electrical injuries can incapacitate immediately, leaving the team member unable to call for assistance.

Work at significant height without fall protection personnel. A fall that might be survivable with immediate medical response can be fatal with a delayed one. Work at height alone, particularly on ladders or elevated platforms in areas where a fall would not be immediately visible, carries a response delay that significantly changes the outcome.

Handling hazardous materials in a remote area. A chemical splash, an inhalation exposure, or a release that occurs in an isolated location with no one nearby means no immediate decontamination, no emergency flush, and no one to call for help if the exposure is incapacitating.

Maintenance on heavy equipment or machinery. A pinch point, a crush injury, or an entanglement alone means no one to stop the machine, no one to call for help, and no one to provide any first aid in the critical minutes before emergency services arrive.

A real-world example:

A night shift maintenance technician was performing a routine filter change on a large hydraulic press alone at approximately 2 a.m. A fitting released unexpectedly under residual pressure and struck him in the face, causing significant injury and disorienting him. He was unable to operate his radio clearly. The facility had no lone team member check-in system in place. He was found by the incoming day shift operator nearly four hours later. He survived but sustained permanent injury. The task itself was routine. The absence of any check-in system meant that when something went wrong at 2 a.m., there was no mechanism to know until the shift changed.

Team member engagement:

“Are there tasks in our facility that currently get done alone that should require a second person or a check-in? Name them specifically.”

“Has anyone here performed a task alone that they knew at the time should probably have had someone else present? What made you proceed anyway?”

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Wednesday – Check-In Systems and Lone team member Plans

Discussion:

The primary risk of working alone is not that the hazard will find you. It is that when it does, no one will know in time to help. The solution to that is not eliminating solo work, most of it is unavoidable in any real operation. The solution is a check-in system that closes the gap between when something goes wrong and when someone knows about it.

What an effective lone team member check-in looks like:

A defined check-in interval. The team member and a designated contact agree on how often the team member will check in, typically between 15 and 60 minutes depending on the risk level of the task. The interval should reflect the time it would take for an injury to become life-threatening without assistance.

A designated contact who knows the plan. Someone specific, not just anyone in the facility, needs to know where the team member is, what they are doing, and what to do if a check-in is missed. A supervisor, a control room operator, or a designated team member all work. The key is that this person is actively monitoring, not just vaguely aware.

A missed check-in protocol. If a check-in is missed, there needs to be a clear, specific action: call the team member, go to the location, or call emergency services. The protocol should specify how many attempts are made and over what time period before escalating. Vague guidance like check on them does not produce a consistent or fast enough response.

A start and end notification. The check-in system begins when the team member enters the area or starts the task and ends when they are clear. This prevents the situation where no one realizes the team member has not come back because the system was never formally started.

What to do before starting any solo high-risk task:

- Tell someone specifically where you are going and what you are doing.
- Establish a check-in time and who you will check in with.
- Confirm what that person will do if they do not hear from you.
- Make sure you have a reliable way to communicate: radio, phone, or a personal alarm device.

A real-world example:

A utilities technician at a food processing facility worked alone regularly during early morning startup checks across several buildings on a large campus. The facility introduced a simple radio check-in protocol: the technician would check in with the control room every 30 minutes during the rounds, and if a check-in was missed by more than five minutes the control room operator would attempt contact twice before dispatching someone to the last known location. Three months after the system started, the technician slipped on an icy walkway between buildings in winter and fractured his ankle. He was unable to walk but was able to key his radio briefly. The control room operator had him located within four minutes. Before the check-in system, that same injury in the same location would likely have left him on the ground in freezing temperatures for over an hour before the next scheduled contact.

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Thursday – Building Personal Standards That Travel With You

Discussion:

Working alone is different from working with a crew. We have covered the specific risks this week and the systems that help manage them. Today we want to talk about something that sits underneath all of it: the personal habits and standards that a team member carries into every situation, regardless of whether anyone else is present.

The most reliable protection in a solo work situation is not a procedure or a check-in system, although both matter. It is a team member who has decided that their standards do not change based on who is around. That kind of consistency does not happen automatically. It is built deliberately, through practice and through understanding why the standard exists in the first place.

When you understand why a step matters, you are far more likely to do it when no one is watching. When you are just following a rule because someone told you to, the rule loses weight the moment the person is not there. The goal this week is to help every person on this team connect their safety habits to real reasons so that those habits hold up in every situation, including the ones where nobody is around to notice.

What personal safety standards look like in practice:

Using PPE not because it is required but because you understand what it is protecting you from. Doing a pre-task check not because it is on a form but because you know what it is designed to catch. Following the procedure on a familiar task not because someone is watching but because you know the step exists for a situation you have not encountered yet.

These are small shifts in thinking, but they produce very different behavior over time. A team member who follows a procedure because it makes sense to them will follow it alone on a Saturday morning. A team member who follows it to avoid consequences will find ways around it the moment the consequences feel distant.

A real-world example:

A maintenance technician at a chemical plant had worked alone regularly for years. What his team members noticed about him was that his work looked the same whether the supervisor was present or not. When asked about it once, he said something that stuck with the crew: the hazard does not take the day off when my supervisor does. He had internalized the reasoning behind every step he followed to the point where skipping them did not feel like getting away with something. It felt like leaving himself exposed. That shift in perspective is what this conversation is trying to build.

Team member engagement:

"Think about a safety habit you have that you genuinely believe in, not just because it is required but because you understand what it protects you from. What is it and when did it become yours rather than just a rule?"

"Is there a procedure or a step in your work that you follow but honestly do not fully understand the reason for? This is a good time to ask."

"What would need to change about how we explain the why behind our safety requirements for people to own them more fully rather than just comply with them?"

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Friday – Week Wrap-Up

Discussion:

This week we covered a topic that affects every person on this team who has ever worked a shift where they were the only one in an area, on an early morning startup, a late night maintenance round, or just a moment when the rest of the crew stepped away. We talked about what changes when you are alone, specifically how the recovery system for when things go wrong disappears even when the hazards stay exactly the same. We identified the tasks that carry enough risk that working alone is genuinely unacceptable and requires a second person or a formal system. We covered what a check-in plan looks like and why having one is the most important single thing a lone team member can do to protect themselves. And we talked honestly about the shortcuts people take when no one is watching and what it means to hold yourself to the same standard regardless of who is present.

The bottom line for this week is simple. When you are working alone, you are your own first line of defense and your own last line of defense at the same time. That is not a reason to be afraid of solo work. It is a reason to take it seriously in a way that is specific to the situation: have a plan, have a contact, have a check-in, and hold the standard even when no one is watching you hold it.

Weekly Challenge Report-Back:

At the start of this week, each person was asked to identify every situation in their regular work where they are alone or effectively alone, what the task is, where it happens, and what the current plan is if something goes wrong. Let's hear what people found.

"What situations did you identify where you work alone? Were any of them ones you had not thought about as lone team member situations before this week?"

"Did you have a check-in plan in place for any of them? If not, what would that plan look like?"

"Is there a task that came up this week that you think should not be done alone based on what we discussed? What do we need to do about it?"

Closing questions:

"What is one specific change to how we handle lone team member situations on this team that should come out of this week?"

"What would you want a team member to do if they realized you had been alone in a high-risk area longer than expected and had not checked in?"