WEEKLY SAFETY BRIEFING

WEEK 48

Normalizing the Abnormal

When "that's just how it is" becomes the hazard no one sees

Monday, November 23 – Friday, November 27, 2026

THIS WEEK AT A GLANCE

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
Why We Stop Seeing It	**Temporary Becomes Normal**	**Small Signs Something Is Off**	**Safe to Say "Not Normal"**	**Wrap-Up and Report-Back**

Introduction for Leaders

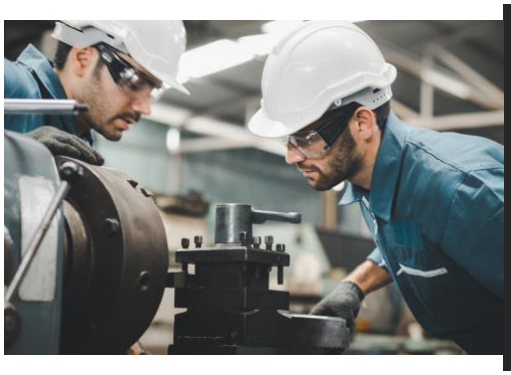
This week is about the hazards that hide in plain sight. Not the new, obvious ones that everyone reacts to, but the slow ones: the drip that has been there since spring, the guard that rattles, the cord that has been taped for months, the alarm everyone has learned to talk over. The people who see these conditions every day are often the people least likely to notice them.

Safety researchers have a name for this pattern: normalization of deviance. Sociologist Diane Vaughan coined the phrase while studying the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster, where engineers had gradually come to accept a known problem because it kept not causing a catastrophe. You do not need the term to have the conversation. The plain idea underneath it is enough: when something is wrong and nothing bad happens, we quietly reset our idea of normal.

None of this is about blame. It is about giving your team the permission and the language to say "that's not normal" out loud, and making sure that when they do, something happens.

How to Frame This Week

- **Walk the area before each session.** Look at it as if it were your first day. Whatever catches your eye is exactly the kind of thing the team has stopped seeing.
- **Monday carries the weekly challenge.** Check in mid-week on what people are finding, and use Friday for the report-back.
- **Treat what comes up as findings, not complaints.** If someone points out a problem that has been there a long time, thank them first. A response that sounds like "why didn't you say something sooner?" will end the conversation.
- **Be ready to act.** Bring a way to log what people raise and a commitment to follow up. A team that reports issues and sees nothing change learns to stop reporting.



MONDAY · NOV 23

Why We Stop Seeing It

The brain is built to tune out what never changes. That is a strength, until it hides a hazard.

Walk into a bakery and the smell of fresh bread hits you. Ten minutes later you barely notice it. That is not a flaw; it is your brain doing its job. It filters out what stays the same so it can pay attention to what changes. The trouble is that the filter cannot tell the difference between the smell of bread and the sound of a bearing that is slowly wearing out.

In a workplace, the same thing happens with hazards. The first time someone sees a puddle under a machine, it stands out. The fifth time, it is "the puddle." By the twentieth time, it is part of the floor.

Why familiar hazards disappear

- **"It has always been this way."** When a condition predates you, or nothing has happened so far, it starts to feel like the baseline rather than a problem.
- **Nothing bad happened.** Every day without an incident quietly "proves" the situation is safe. Each close call that does not become an injury gets counted as evidence the risk is low, when it may only be evidence of luck.
- **Everyone else is fine with it.** If coworkers walk past it every day, speaking up can feel like being the only person who is bothered.
- **It is someone else's job.** A maintenance request that is already in the system can make a hazard feel handled, even months later.

WEEKLY CHALLENGE

This week, walk your work area at the start of a shift as if it were your first day. Find three things that seem off, no matter how small or how long they have been that way, and write them down. Bring your list to Friday.

TEAM MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

1. *What is something in this area that you stopped noticing a long time ago?*
2. *When you first started here, what did you notice that no longer stands out to you?*



TUESDAY · NOV 24

How "Temporary" Becomes "Normal"

A workaround meant to last a day can quietly become the procedure.

Almost no one decides to accept a hazard. It happens in small steps. Something wears out or stops working. A fix is not available right away, so someone finds a workaround: a bucket under a leak, tape on a cord, a wedge in a door that will not latch. It is labeled temporary. Nothing bad happens. A few weeks later, the workaround is simply how the area works.

The slide usually follows the same four steps

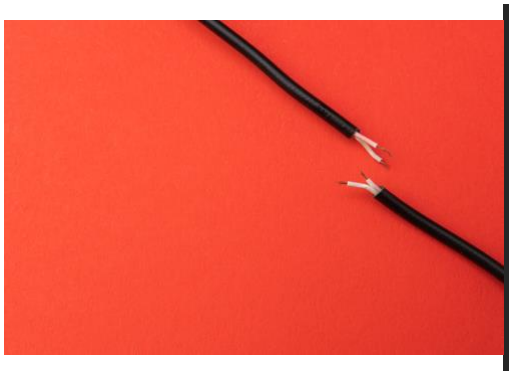
- **1. Something is off.** A part wears, a procedure no longer fits the work, or a condition changes.
- **2. A workaround appears.** It solves the immediate problem and keeps the work moving. Often it is a clever fix by someone trying to help.
- **3. Nothing happens.** The workaround holds, and the absence of an incident feels like proof that it is fine.
- **4. The standard moves.** What was once a deviation becomes the expectation. New team members learn it as the correct way, and the original safeguard is forgotten.

The danger is that every step makes the next one easier. The margin of safety built into the original design gets used up a little at a time, and no one sees it shrinking until the day it is gone.

> **REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE**
>
> At a metal fabrication shop, a hydraulic hose on a press began to weep a small amount of fluid. A drip tray was set underneath as a stopgap and a work order was submitted. The work order sat behind more urgent repairs. Over the following months the tray was emptied every shift, and new operators assumed that was part of the routine. One morning the hose, which had been deteriorating the whole time, failed under pressure and sprayed hot hydraulic fluid across the work area. No one was seriously hurt, but the operator was within arm's reach. Afterward, several people said they had known the hose was a problem. Each had assumed that because the tray was in place and a work order was open, someone else was handling it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *Can you think of a workaround in your area that was supposed to be temporary? How long has it really been there?*
2. *When a temporary fix goes in, how do we make sure it gets a real fix and an end date?*
3. *If a new team member asked why we do something a certain way, could we explain why, or would the answer be "that's how it's always been"?*



WEDNESDAY · NOV 25

Small Signs Something Is Off

Equipment almost always gives a warning before it fails. The skill is noticing it.

Machines, tools, and systems rarely fail without warning. More often they send signals for days or weeks beforehand. The challenge is that these signals are small, they build gradually, and the people closest to the equipment are the ones most accustomed to them.

Look, listen, smell, feel

- **Look.** Fluid on the floor or on a fitting, frayed or taped cords, rust or cracks, a guard that does not sit flush, a gauge reading that differs from what it used to be.
- **Listen.** A new rattle, whine, or grinding. A pump that sounds different than it did last month. A machine that only makes a noise "when it warms up."
- **Smell.** Burning, hot oil, or electrical odors, or a chemical smell in a spot where there was not one before.
- **Feel.** Vibration that was not there, a surface hotter than it should be, a control that sticks or needs extra force.

The phrases that should make us stop

"It always does that." • *"It's been like that since I started."*
"Just give it a bump and it works." • *"There's a tag on it, so it's fine."*

Each of these describes a known problem that has been absorbed into the routine. When you hear yourself or a coworker say one, treat it as a prompt to ask: has anyone actually looked at this lately?

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

In a small manufacturing plant, an extension cord ran across the floor to power a buffing machine. The outer jacket had been damaged months earlier, exposing a short section of inner wiring, and someone had wrapped it in electrical tape. The tape became part of the cord. Operators stepped over it, rolled carts across it, and used it every day. One afternoon a cart wheel pinched the repair against the floor and the damaged section arced. The operator, standing in a damp spot from a nearby wash-down, received a shock that left him shaken and sent him to be checked out. A later review found that at least three employees had noticed the tape, and each had assumed someone had already approved it.

TEAM MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

1. *What is one piece of equipment in this area with a sound, smell, or quirk that people have learned to live with?*
2. *Which of those warning phrases have you heard in this area? What would it take to turn them into a report instead?*



THURSDAY · NOV 26

Making It Safe to Say "That's Not Normal"

Fresh eyes spot what experience overlooks, if the team lets them speak.

The people best positioned to spot normalized hazards are often the ones who have not normalized them yet: new hires, temporary workers, contractors, visitors, and people from other areas. They have not had time to build the filter. They look at the floor and see what is actually there.

The question is whether they say anything. New people are often reluctant to question how things are done, especially when the people doing it are experienced. If the first time someone asks "is that supposed to be like that?" the answer is "don't worry about it," they learn not to ask again.

What makes it safe to speak up

- **Thank first, explain second.** When someone points out a long-standing problem, the first response is appreciation. The history and the "we already know about that" can wait.
- **Close the loop.** Tell the person what happened. Even "it's scheduled for next Tuesday" or "here's why it's that way" shows the report mattered.
- **Invite fresh eyes on purpose.** Ask new team members at the end of their first week what looked odd or confusing. Ask visitors and contractors the same question.
- **Let leaders go first.** When a leader says "I walked past that for a month and never saw it," it gives everyone else permission to admit the same.

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

A facility brought in a new maintenance technician who had come from a different industry. In his first week he asked why an emergency eyewash station near the mixing area was partly blocked by a stack of pallets. The long-time team members had added to that stack gradually over the years, and no one remembered deciding to put it there. The question was awkward for a moment. Then the supervisor thanked him, moved the pallets on the spot, and had a clear zone marked on the floor so the area would stay open. Later she said the best part was that he simply asked, and that it embarrassed no one.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. *When you started in this area, what did you notice that seemed odd? Did you say anything? What happened?*
2. *If a new team member pointed out a long-standing problem tomorrow, how would we respond? How do we want to respond?*
3. *What is one question we could ask every new team member at the end of their first week?*



FRIDAY · NOV 27

Wrap-Up and Report-Back

A problem that is familiar is not a problem that is solved.

This week was about the hazards we have stopped seeing. We talked about why our brains tune out what never changes, how a temporary workaround can quietly become the standard, the small signals equipment gives before it fails, and what it takes for a team to feel safe saying "that's not normal."

The core message is simple: **a problem that is familiar is not a problem that is solved.** The goal is not constant alarm. It is a habit of pausing now and then and asking, "Would I accept this if I saw it for the first time today?"

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Familiar hazards fade into the background because the brain filters out what does not change.
- ✓ Temporary fixes become permanent standards in small steps, and each step uses up part of the safety margin.
- ✓ Equipment sends warnings. Look, listen, smell, and feel for what is different.
- ✓ Phrases like "it always does that" are a prompt to report, not a reason to relax.
- ✓ Fresh eyes are only valuable if people feel safe sharing what they see.

Weekly challenge report-back

At the start of the week, each team member was asked to walk their work area as if it were their first day and write down three things that seemed off. Let's hear what people found.

REPORT-BACK QUESTIONS

1. *What did you notice that you had stopped seeing? Was anything surprising?*
2. *Is there anything on your list that should be reported or fixed before next week?*

CLOSING QUESTIONS

1. *What is one thing in this area that you would not accept if you saw it for the first time today?*
2. *What is one habit we can build so that we keep noticing?*