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# America's greatest threat: Unsafe work conditions

**The Texas fertilizer plant explosion reveals that lax regulations are far more dangerous than any form of terrorism**

BY DAVID SIROTA



The remains of a fertilizer plant burn after an explosion at the plant in the town of West, near Waco, Texas early April 16, 2013. (Credit: Reuters)

If I told you that government officials possessed ironclad proof that an imminent threat to this nation had the capacity to create a 9/11's worth of injuries and deaths every year at an annual economic cost of a quarter trillion dollars, ask yourself: Would you say we should do something about it?

I'm guessing you would. Out of a basic sense of patriotism, you would probably at minimum support some new security regulations and investments in enforcing those regulations, even if that meant paying slightly higher taxes. After all, you profess to love America, and that's the least we should do in the face of such a threat to our country, right?

Now ask yourself: Would your response to the original query change if you discovered that

the threat at hand was not from a terrorist, but from unsafe workplaces — and that because of that unaddressed problem, these casualties and costs have already become a fact of life in America? Come on, admit it — your response probably would change. Yes, many who would reflexively support more regulations and enforcement in the face of a foreign terrorist threat would suddenly scoff at more regulations and enforcement in the face of unsafe workplaces. Why the double standard?

That's the troubling question raised by the reaction — or, really, lack thereof — to last month's catastrophic explosion in West, Texas.

# STOP™ For Each Other Safety Self-Evaluation



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Complete these statements by circling the letter that best describes what you do.

1. Before I do a routine job, I
  - a. don't think about the safe work practices to follow.
  - b. assume I know safe work practices to follow.
  - c. sometimes review the safe work practices.
  - d. review the safe work practices.
  
2. I "see safety"
  - a. when management makes it an issue.
  - b. when I'm looking specifically for unsafe situations.
  - c. whenever an unsafe situation occurs.
  - d. in every situation, safe or unsafe, on and off the job.
  
3. When I see a potentially unsafe situation, I
  - a. tell someone to correct it immediately.
  - b. find out who is responsible and make sure he or she knows I'm unhappy.
  - c. correct it, then write it up.
  - d. correct it as needed and talk with the people responsible for the unsafe situation about working safely.
  
4. When I see an employee working safely, I
  - a. leave the employee alone since he or she isn't doing anything wrong.
  - b. point out the safe work to others in the area as a good example.
  - c. sometimes acknowledge the safe work by saying something like "good job" to the employee.
  - d. Often acknowledge the safe work by talking with the employee about the job and safe work practices.

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5. To me, Total Observation means
  - a. looking all around an area to find unsafe situations.
  - b. looking closely at a small area to find unsafe situations.
  - c. using all my senses to see safe and unsafe situations in an area.
  - d. using all my senses and looking above, below, behind, and inside objects for safe and unsafe situations.
  
6. Having written procedures available for every job I do is
  - a. unnecessary; I already know the job.
  - b. a good idea in theory but not in practice; I rarely use written procedures.
  - c. a good idea; I sometimes consult written procedures.
  - d. important to safe work; I know and follow the written procedures for every job we do.
  
7. When I observe employees, I look at their personal protective equipment
  - a. rarely. They should know what to wear to work safely.
  - b. if they are doing an especially dangerous job.
  - c. if it seems to be defective or inadequate.
  - d. from head to toe.
  
8. I consider neatness and orderliness
  - a. nuisances that get in the way of production.
  - b. good ideas, but not realistic when we're in a time crunch.
  - c. good ideas as long as they don't interfere with other priorities.
  - d. important all the time, no matter what other priorities are involved.

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9. The physical positions that I and other employees use when we do our jobs
  - a. have very little to do with safety; I don't look at them.
  - b. could be related to safety.
  - c. are sometimes related to safety; I sometimes look at them.
  - d. have a direct connection to safety; I always look at them.
  
10. If a tool or piece of equipment isn't in good condition or right for a job, I
  - a. use it anyway if production requirements demand it.
  - b. use it and report it after doing the job.
  - c. only use it if it is an absolute emergency.
  - d. will not use it until it is repaired or replaced.
  
11. I do formal observations of employees for safe work
  - a. rarely. I am not a "safety official."
  - b. when my management tells me to.
  - c. on a random basis.
  - d. on a regularly scheduled basis.
  
12. Which statement best describes your attitude toward safety?
  - a. Safety is not as important as things like production, quality, cost, or morale.
  - b. Safety is important as long as it doesn't get in the way of production, quality, cost, or morale.
  - c. Safety is almost as important as production, quality, cost, or morale.
  - d. Safety is equal in importance to production, quality, cost, and morale.

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## I COULD HAVE SAVED A LIFE THAT DAY

I could have saved a life that day  
But I chose to look the other way.  
It wasn't that I didn't care.  
I had the time, and I was there  
But I didn't want to seem a fool,  
Or argue over a safety rule.  
I knew he'd done the job before,  
And if I called it wrong, he might get sore.



The chances didn't seem that bad.  
I've done the same and he knew I had.  
So I shook my head and walked on by—  
He knew the risks as well as I.  
He took the chance, I closed an eye,  
And with that act I let him die.

I could have saved a life that day,  
But I chose to look the other way.



Now every time I see his wife,  
I'll know I should have saved his life.  
That guilt is something I must bear,  
But it isn't something you need share.  
If you see a risk that others take,  
That puts their health or life at stake.  
The question asked, or thing you say,  
Could help them live another day.



If you see a risk and walk away,  
Then hope you never have to say  
I could have saved a life that day,  
But I chose to look the other way.

—Don Merrell