

“All injuries are preventable”.

This is a routinely held belief in many organisations with a strong, positive culture, but what do we really mean when we say this and does it really matter if we hold this belief?

Let's take the phrase on face value. It simply says that it is possible to prevent all injuries; it doesn't say by whom, it doesn't imply that any individual or possibly even any specific group can prevent them all. It says *injuries* not *accidents*. We often end up having to rely on PPE, which in most cases does not prevent accidents but can protect us from injury when the accident does happen. The statement says *ALL* injuries but do we really mean this? Many organisations state this then go on to qualify it by saying all serious/reportable/lost time etc. If not ALL, then which do we think cannot be prevented? I don't recall coming across any injury reports that concluded that nothing could have been done to prevent them. The reality is that we generally find something after the event and the trick is recognising that missing control before the event. We all know this as Risk Assessment!

If we are left believing that we cannot prevent ALL injuries then we must accept that some will happen – so which are we prepared to accept? Actually there are some injuries that I am prepared to accept. When I go climbing I absolutely believe that it is possible to prevent a serious injury resulting from a fall by choosing the appropriate route, protecting it adequately, using the right equipment and listening to what my body is telling me regarding how strong I feel, am I on form that day or feeling tired? Yet I am prepared to accept the inevitable scrapes and minor cuts on my knuckles and the backs of my hands resulting from jamming them into rough cracks in order to make progress. Actually I could prevent these - by not doing the activity – but I want to climb because I get a lot of benefit from it. The only way to have zero risk is to remove the hazard which is not always an option. Sometimes, removing the hazard is a lazy option that often results in the derogatory 'Elf & Safety' comments we read about in the tabloid press. The approach of removing the hazard rather than controlling the risk is not only lazy but potentially harmful in that it prevents people from experiencing any degree of risk – this is particularly true in the case of children. This is often the choice of the risk averse – people who have a very low tolerance of risk and so do all they can to avoid it. Exposure to some risk (even if it is a perceived risk) can be very beneficial as it helps us to tune-in to risk, recognise it and deal with it when we have to. I don't want to see my child get badly hurt – but similarly I would be concerned if she had gone all through her early development without some bumps and scrapes, especially if it had been achieved by restricting her exposure to genuine challenges that occasionally resulted in minor mishaps or near-misses.

It is all about getting the balance right and this is achieved by being able to assess the risk – not the formal, written process that we are all familiar with, but being able to dynamically react to a changing situation, recognise the hazards, picture the consequences, weigh up the likelihood of it occurring and then making the appropriate choices. Far too many people do not get the opportunity to go through this process. Even with a very hazardous activity such as driving we are cocooned in a large metal box surrounded by an ever-increasing array of safety measures.

I get to practice this dynamic risk assessment every time I go climbing, skiing, mountain-biking and even running or walking on the fells. I would always encourage my daughter to participate in these 'adventure' activities in the hope that when she is faced with a hazard in the workplace or elsewhere in the environment, she will have developed the intuition through previous experiences to deal with them appropriately.