

## The Changing Definition of Safety

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What comes to mind when somebody refers to *safety*? Although everybody knows what it is, few can readily define it without using the word “safe” in their definition. Safety defined is: “The condition of being safe from undergoing or causing hurt, injury, or loss.” Another definition makes it a bit clearer: “To protect against failure, breakage, or accident.” Getting into the matter of calling injuries and collisions “accidents” is another issue altogether and requires another definition: “An unforeseen and unplanned event or circumstance; lack of intention or necessity; an unfortunate event resulting especially from carelessness or ignorance; an unexpected happening causing loss or injury which is not due to any fault or misconduct on the part of the person injured but for which legal relief may be sought.”

In today’s world, the word takes on a different meaning every time it is used. In the workplace, one may think that safety refers to the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) and safety standards. In the world of transportation, there’s the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration and their safety regulations. Driving safely is pretty loosely defined. What *driving safely* implies is that a driver follows a set of established safety rules (regulations) that are also designed to lessen the potential of a collision resulting in a personal injury, death or property loss. But, there has to be a belief within each driver that driving by its very nature can be a dangerous activity and the driver has to exercise a degree of selfless safety sense for the good of those driving around him or her.

In that respect, we are discussing a safety ethic, one that presupposes that a person does not intentionally drive in such a manner that would result in a collision or other type of loss. Yet, take a look around you the next time you are out in your car or truck and see how many people are not exercising a safety ethic!

The recent focus on safe driving is the matter of texting and using cell phones while driving. This topic is so serious now it is the subject of a collaboration of cell phone providers (i.e., AT&T, Verizon Wireless, Sprint and T-Mobile) that will be joined by 200 other organizations backing a multi-million dollar ad campaign. So, this is cell phone safety.

When it comes to safety training, companies train their employees to perform certain tasks in a prescribed manner that is deemed "safe," or a procedure designed to reduce the potential for a loss, like a finger, a hand, arm, foot, or life. But, companies already expect that their drivers will have already had safety training in driving and there's no need for spending time training drivers to drive safely. Have they come to grips with their drivers who routinely text or talk on cell phones while driving? Do they have policies in place that address this issue and do they enforce them?

Rules and regulations by their very nature are designed to reduce the potential for a loss of any type. These safety regulations become viewed casually by too many, are

often ignored, and when there is a catastrophic loss, everyone looks at what safety procedures were not followed.

In Bangladesh, a few months ago, a building collapse that killed hundreds of low-paid workers in a garment factory that produced several well-known brand name clothing products focused the world's attention on the building's construction standards (i.e., safety) and lack of a safe working environment, not to mention the matter of low paid employees. The reaction was such that high-end clothing companies scrambled their public relations people to distance themselves from the conditions and promise to become more socially aware.

So, over the past few decades, safety has taken on a different definition depending on the situation. To firefighters, for example, safety means protecting against a fire that could destroy or damage a home, so we discuss fire safety with children in the attempt to educate them about the dangers of fire. In Lewiston, Maine, a few months ago, three tenement buildings were deliberately set on fire, resulting in the displacement of about 100 families. Two of the fires were determined to be set by 12-year olds, while one was set by two adults. Somewhere along the line, the importance of safety wasn't learned.

In recent high profile tragedies, safety was at the heart of explosions. One was in West, Texas, a small community northeast of Austin where a small fire in a fertilizer manufacturing plant suddenly erupted into a massive explosion killing numerous members of the local volunteer fire department, ruining many homes and a school

nearby. Safety investigators from the Alcohol Tobacco & Firearms (ATF) agency were brought in to perform the investigation and have determined that in spite of requirements that the amounts of chemicals were to be reported to federal and state authorities that regulate this commodity (and others like it), those requirements were not followed. Regulations and safety precautions are developed to reduce the potential of tragedies such as this.

In Boston, most everyone is familiar with the tragedy that took place during the Patriot's Day race when it is alleged that two brothers set bombs to explode at a time when there would be a maximum of people present to observe the race at the finish line. Suddenly, *public safety* became the focus of attention. Days later, a gun battle erupted in the streets of a Cambridge neighborhood following a search for the surviving brother. Once again, public safety became the focus of attention for the nation as law enforcement went about trying to locate the fugitive. The entire Boston area was literally shut down, from transit systems to cars and trucks coming into and leaving the city. Residents were ordered to remain in their homes or businesses. The public safety edict was unprecedented. Safety prevailed.

Then there's safety of sports and recreation. When I was a lad, riding a bicycle was commonplace and we never wore a helmet. Today, everyone from roller skaters to cyclists wear helmets, although a lot of kids on skate boards don't. Still, safety and bike riding are intertwined, although many motorcyclists refuse to wear helmets and suffer the consequences when involved in a collision or other incident that results in their

falling off. In car races, from Indy to NASCAR, safety plays a vital role from crash worthiness to driver safety (just look at the protective clothing drivers wear).

Today, safety has been coupled to *security*. Indeed, when stores or hotels advertise for a “safety and security” position, the term is usually intended to mean security. Grocery store chains have safety and security personnel who monitor safety in the store(s) to ensure that patrons don’t slip or fall or become otherwise injured while on the premises, but this is low-visibility for liability exposure, and we think nothing of walking into a store since we take our safety for granted. But, they are also concerned about theft, and that’s where security comes in. The same is true at large hotels and resorts. Nicking the silverware is just one of their concerns. (Ever wonder why hotels no longer emboss their towels with their names? VIA Rail Canada stopped ordering dining car silverware with the *VIA* imprint on it since too many passengers wanted souvenirs!)

So, safety means different things to different people. But, what hasn’t changed is the value and priority of safety. Safety isn’t something you pull out of a drawer only on certain occasions...it is ever-present, although we may not recognize the fact. It doesn’t matter if you are taking a stroll, or walking the dog, working in your office or working out in “the field,” driving your car while enjoying whatever music you may have playing on the radio or CD – safety is the most important aspect of our daily living, with the stress on the word *living*.

Don’t take safety for granted. Pay attention! Your life, and that of others, depends on it.