S.A.F.E. TALK
STOP AND FOCUS EVERYDAY
WEEKLY
SAFETY LEADERSHIP DISCUSSIONS

Come-Along SAFETY

PULLING YOUR SAFETY UP TO SAG

ISSUE CAST-016

COME-ALONG SAFETY LLC

TRENCH COLLAPSE



ABOUT THESE DISCUSSIONS

Every Come-Along Safety LLC *S.A.F.E. TALK* discussion is based on an actual workplace incident. To protect the privacy of individuals and organizations, there may be names, locations, dates, and selected details that have been changed or omitted. In some cases, certain elements may be integrated for clarity or necessary detail. The focus of these talks is on learning and helping to strengthen the decisions that prevent serious injuries and fatalities. Thanks for Coming Along with us.

INCIDENT PROFILE

INCIDENT CATEGORY	SIF Near Miss: Trench wall collapse while a cooperative employee was working inside an excavation. Potential for fatal crushing injuries or burial.
EXPOSURE TYPE	An employee was inside a trench when saturated soil began breaking loose. The trench wall subsequently collapsed, narrowly missing the employee.
LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLE	Recognizing danger and responding quickly are important, but effective safety leadership identifies and controls life-threatening exposures before employees put themselves in that vulnerable position.
CRITICAL DECISION	The decision to enter or continue working inside an excavation following significant rainfall, when ground stability and the need for protective measures must be carefully evaluated.
PRIMARY CONTROLS	Competent-person inspections • Soil classification and evaluation • Appropriate cave-in protective systems • Reassessment following rainfall • Safe access and egress • Employee positioning • Stop-work authority • Effective job briefings
APPLICABLE STANDARDS	29 CFR 1926.651(k), Excavation Inspections • 1926.651(j), Protection from Loose Rock or Soil • 1926.652(a), Protection from Cave-ins • 1926.650(b), Competent Person. Not exhaustive.

SAFETY TOPIC SUMMARY

BACKGROUND. A three-man cooperative crew was working on an underground project, attempting to locate buried duct and this was the second day on the job as the first day had been frustrating since they were unable to accomplish what they had hoped. Overnight, there had been significant rainfall in the area, leaving the ground saturated. The crew was aware of the wet conditions and had conducted a job briefing before beginning the work to discuss the condition of the excavation as well as other things. After discussion, they decided that it was fine to proceed in the same manner as the day before.

THE SETUP. One crew member was operating the backhoe, carefully moving some of the dirt outside the trench while trying to locate the buried duct. A second employee had jumped down in the excavation while the third was serving as an observer. The crew said they were maintaining awareness of their surroundings in the six-foot ditch. However, the crew had not determined the soil classification nor were they using any protection from the sidewalls in the ditch or using any other form of protection such as sloping.

THE INCIDENT. As the work continued, the observer noticed a chunk of earth breaking loose and falling into the trench and he immediately yelled at the employee inside the ditch to let him know. The worker was able to grab hold of the observer who helped pull him out of the ditch without injury. After getting to safety, the remaining trench wall immediately collapsed, just missing a potentially fatal event. No one was injured, and they shut the job down until next steps would be decided with supervision. We do not know what those next steps were that the crew took.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN HERE?

HOW WAS IT DECIDED THAT THIS DITCH WAS SAFE? The decision to enter the ditch appears to have been based on the crew's judgment that conditions were good enough, largely because they had worked in the same excavation on the previous day. Although they discussed the overnight rainfall and saturated soil during their job briefing, there is no indication that a competent person conducted the required inspection, evaluated soil conditions, or determined the appropriate protective system. The crew probably did what they always did and relied on their previous experience rather than a solid documented assessment of the excavation hazards. The job briefing identified the changing conditions but certainly failed to turn those concerns into actions that would protect the crew. "Just be a little more careful…"

WE GOT LUCKY. NOW WHAT? We're certainly glad that nobody was hurt. But a near miss like this is frightening and should launch any good incident analysis program into serious action, beginning with an after action review. It would ask: What went wrong? What made this near miss incident possible? Were the appropriate controls established and verified? And most importantly, what changes will we make on the next job so that the next worker doesn't just have to hope he gets out quick enough?

THE FIVE-FOOT MISCONCEPTION. Even though the trench was six feet deep, let's talk about this. How often have we heard that cave-in protection isn't necessary if the trench is less than five feet deep? OSHA provides a limited exception for excavations less than five feet deep only when a competent person's examination indicates no potential cave-in. The depth alone does not determine whether employees are safe. Why was he even down in that ditch when the backhoe operator was actively digging? So many things can go sideways in that situation.

LACK OF EXPERIENCE FOR THE TASK OFTEN SHOWS UP ON JOBS LIKE THIS. Most cooperative workers have limited experience with deeper underground excavations. So, when there is a job to do like this, the co-op might not even be confident of the steps that need to be taken nor the crew members doing the job. Therefore a 6-foot ditch might get treated like a typical 3-foot ditch because that's what they know and they just roll with it and wing it. That's how things can so easily go south.

Workers must be trained to recognize when they find themselves in a situation outside of their scope of training and qualifications. And qualified or competent person doesn't mean that they heard someone talk about it in a meeting one time and signed a paper that they were there. And the title "Journeyman lineman" means nothing other than the qualifications that the utility or contractor has assigned to that title. Qualified for the task at hand means that workers fully understand how to protect themselves while performing the job and that they have demonstrated that competency. Did you know that online training (OSHA calls it Computer Based Training or CBT) without a live instructor to answer any questions is not considered training when it falls under 1910.269 or 1926 Subpart V? In other words, a computer alone can't even check the box. They must be able to *"…ask questions and interact with the instructor."*

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QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS

1. **Assessing the Hazard:** How do we determine that an excavation is safe to enter, and who is qualified and responsible for making that determination?
2. **Learning from Near Misses:** If this had happened at our cooperative, what steps would we have taken in our incident analysis program to ensure the next crew isn't just lucky?
3. **The Five-Foot Misconception:** Under what circumstances can an employee enter an excavation less than five feet deep without cave-in protection, and who makes that determination?
4. **Training and Qualifications:** How do we verify that our employees are truly competent to perform excavation work safely, especially when the job falls outside their normal experience?
5. **Changing Conditions:** When conditions change from one day to the next, such as heavy rainfall, what should trigger a reassessment of the hazards and the protective measures needed before work resumes?

THIS WEEK'S PULL

Today's Leadership Behavior

Before you leave the shop to do a job that involves an excavation, ask your supervisor exactly who is qualified and responsible as the competent person for evaluating soil conditions when necessary. Seek clarity on how qualifications have been determined, how everyone can be confident that the appropriate protective measures will be in place regardless of the situation, the limitations of the training and qualifications for working in excavations (e.g., 6-foot ditch), and all methods of control available to the workers.

Pulling Your Safety Up to Sag.

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Disclaimer

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