

## >> TOOLBOX TALK – Situational Awareness

### What is situational awareness

Situational awareness is being aware of where you are, where you are supposed to be, and what is happening around you. Then, more importantly, is there anyone or anything around you that can cause harm to you or others?

Our situational awareness is often clouded by complacency and familiarity, when we should be using that knowledge and experience to understand what is going on around us to help us and others stay safe. How we read a situation can be influenced by many things such as the type of information we have been given, our own experiences and distractions in the workplace.

### Why is it so important?

Especially on a construction site, there is a lot 'going on', or you can often get tied up in your own thoughts, that makes us fail to spot things that can be a major threat to ourselves or others. This temporary lack of situational awareness is a causal factor in many incidents in the construction industry.

It is extremely important to understand that everyone needs to sometimes take a step back and think about their surroundings and of the potential hazards around them. Even the most experienced of people can lack situational awareness, especially when completing tasks that seem mundane or routine.

### Don't let it happen to you...

The following example comes from Jeff Espenship a USAF fighter pilot.

On 27th August 2006, flight OH5191 took off from the wrong runway. It was a little after 06:00 and dark outside when the captain (with nearly 5000 flying hours experience) taxied the aircraft to the runway. After confirming the runway number he taxied onto the wrong runway which was too short for that aircraft to take off on. Air Traffic Control did not have visual contact with the aircraft so they were cleared for takeoff. During take-off

the cockpit is a designated quiet area to allow for concentration, but it was reported that the crew talked too much and were in violation of "sterile cockpit" procedures. This affected everyone's performance and meant that the situational awareness of the crew was reduced and they failed to spot that they were on the wrong runway, despite the co-pilot pointing out that there were no lights on the runway. By the time the captain realised what was happening, it was too late. They failed to stop work despite recognising a hazard (lack of lights even though it was dark). If they had paused to think about their situational awareness the incident may well have ended differently.

Our situational awareness can be further reduced in times of high workload or when under pressure to get a job done on time. In these situations it is essential to maintain a high level of situational awareness to stop any type of incident from happening.

### Improve your situational awareness

Get into the habit of regularly pausing to make a quick mental assessment of your working area. This should certainly be done at the beginning of a new project, when the work environment has changed, when working with new people, and before complacency gets a chance to set in.

When doing so, consider the following:

- Is there anything around you that is a threat to your, or anybody else's, health and safety?
- Can you reduce that threat in a safe manner so that you can carry on working safely?
- If you can't, should you stop working because of that threat?

If you see a hazard or spot an unsafe act, don't turn a blind eye - Deal with the situation and/or report it to your supervisor.

