

Toolbox Talks 2

085: Unsafe Conditions: Combustibles

Discussion leader duties for this session:

Review company policies related to fire prevention. Take a walk through the site and notice where combustibles are located, and be prepared to discuss what's wrong.

What this Safety Talk covers:

This Safety Talk addresses unsafe conditions related to combustibles.

Discussion notes:

Background

Fire needs three things: heat, air, and fuel. Combustibles are fuel. In most safety programs, the combustibles being discussed are things like paper, scrap wood, and packing materials. These often act like kindling. Keeping them away from heat sources is a crucial part of any fire prevention program.

Unsafe conditions involving combustibles

- Accumulation. Any time you see a heap of trash starting to form, stop. Clean it up and get it out of there. If you know you're going to be opening boxes or doing other things that will generate much trash, set up a waste container or other disposal method ahead of time.
- Accumulations neatly stacked. You still have an accumulation. Simply rearranging it doesn't solve the problem. Remove it.
- Combustibles block egress. Don't let people set trash in or near doorways. The last thing you want is your fire exit blocked by a pile of burning debris. The trash doesn't need to be directly in your way to be an exit hazard, either. Keep exits clear.
- Combustibles set higher than the sprinkler line. This is the line above which the sprinklers are no longer effective. Sprinklers can't drop water on materials that are above them. This is a frequent problem in warehouses. If you do retro work in offices, the "office packrat" may have paper stacked to the ceiling. Before working in any enclosed area, make sure no combustibles are above the sprinkler line.
- Combustibles stored near energy sources. An arc flash can ignite combustibles that weren't supposed to be there. Your company may get blamed for the ensuing fire and any resulting injury, death, or property damage. Remove any combustibles stored near energy sources, such as transformers and panels.
- Combustibles stored near loads. Be alert for combustibles stored near heat-producing loads, such as motors and wall-mounted heaters.
- Portable heater placed near combustibles. Move the heater. The typical 120V heater needs two feet of clearance on each side and behind. Face heaters away from combustibles. Check the manufacturer's space recommendations, if need be.
- Makeshift shelters built from combustibles. Stay out of these. They're fire traps.

Review and discussion

1. Fire needs three things. What are they?
2. Why can combustibles become a problem?
3. What should you do if paper or other trash starts to pile up?

[Note to Presenter: Neatly stacking those boxes won't prevent a fire. And, it's a waste of time. If you're going to be opening many boxes or generating scrap in some other way, get a trash container ahead of time. If you're already generating the trash and don't have the container, stop and get one. You save time and improve safety by getting rid of the trash as you go.]

6. What's the sprinkler line, and why should you care? *[Note to Presenter: It's the maximum height at which materials can be located. The local fire marshal will often have a specific number, such as two feet from the ceiling or one foot below the sprinkler head. Anything above that line is illegal. In new construction, the sprinkler line may not be an issue because the structure isn't occupied yet. In retro work, it's a major issue.]*

8. What are some loads that you don't want combustibles to be near?

10. What's wrong with makeshift shelters built from scrap materials?

[illegible]