

ASARC’s Experience with Incident Peer Narratives

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“Not another incident report to complete!” That would have been my reaction a few years ago. However, as the format of our incident peer narratives (IPNs) has evolved, the narratives have proven more and more valuable.

First, I should clarify a couple of background points:

- IPNs do not replace the important incident/accident reports for management, workers compensation boards, etc.
- The Applied Snow and Avalanche Group at the University of Calgary (ASARC) did not invent incident peer narratives. We have borrowed the key ideas from other organizations. Perhaps only the acronym, IPN, is new (but not important).

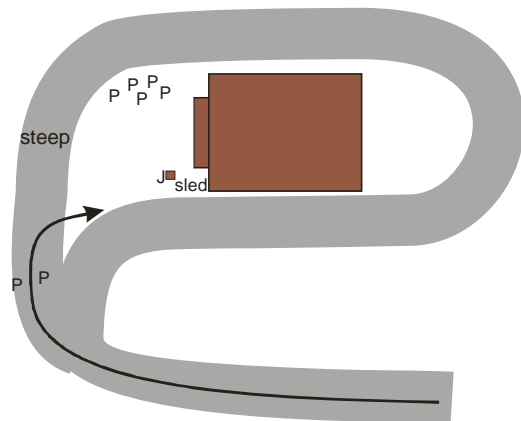
Within ASARC, an Incident Peer Narrative is a story of a workplace incident which:

1. in hindsight, involved too much risk (and may or may not have resulted in injury), and
2. will help peers avoid similar incidents.

Format

Our IPNs try to optimize peer communication and learning. I find most paper or pdf forms too restrictive for telling a story. An IPN can be a written note with diagrams or photos, an oral narrative with some photos or sketches, a powerpoint presentation, or perhaps a video of someone narrating their incident. We have not yet videoed someone explaining and showing photos of their incident, but since technicians and graduate students do move on, I am keen to try this soon.

In December 2005, I lost control of a snowmobile and hit a building. I’ll use this incident to illustrate some of the points from the left column.



The arrowhead marks the point where I powered the sled through deep snow and then immediately lost control of the snowmobile when the spinning track reached the packed snow road (wide gray strip). The “J” and “sled” show where I hit a post and the sled hit the building. Each P marks a person who observed the crash. Everyone at the scene believes my helmet prevented a head injury.

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| <p>Who should see (or read) an IPN? While it might seem that an IPN should be widely shared, many people are more comfortable talking about human factors and what they learned if only their immediate peers are in the room. Put a stranger or two in the room and the story may get sanitized and the lessons muted.</p> | <p><i>There is a written report with a photo and a diagram of this incident. Also, during our annual sled training day, we go to the site where I can stand at the spot where I gave the sled too much gas and make the story come to life.</i></p> |
| <p>Increased audience over time? Written reports, slide presentations and recordings can potentially increase the number of people who learn from the incident. However, knowing the narration is being recorded one way or another can also cause the narrator to clam up or omit some points. Since the human factors and lessons learned are so important in many incidents, any record of the narrative, e.g. pdf, powerpoint or video should clearly state who it is for. Since I manage the various forms of records, I must establish trust by respecting the narrator’s intended audience. If the narrator’s comfort level rises over time, the intended audience can be revised—but only with the narrator’s permission.</p> | <p><i>Initially I was only willing to tell the story to ASARC staff and some friends. By the spring of 2008 I was willing to narrate the incident and show photos at the Canadian Avalanche Association’s Continuing Professional Development Day. For a written copy of the report, photo and diagram of the snowmobile crash, drop me a line at bruce.jamieson@ucalgary.ca.</i></p> <p><i>Over time, others have come forward, giving permission for wider distribution of their IPN.</i></p> |

Blameless?

The IPNs must be blameless! Any concerns about blame will suppress honest discussion of human factors and some of the lessons learned.

Nameless?

When presenting to our staff, we find the use of names adds impact to the narrative. If the narrative is to go beyond a small group of peers, the names of people involved should be replaced with their roles, e.g. the skier, the first snowmobiler on scene, etc.—unless the individuals involved give written permission to have their names included.

If there was no injury, why share the circumstances?

Any incident involving workplace risk that, in hindsight, was too high and has identifiable lessons is worth sharing by some form of IPN. For us, the incident could involve driving, avalanches, snowmobiling, skiing, etc. We consider road travel to be our highest or second highest risk, and need to capture more of the near misses as IPNs so we can learn from them. When someone says “I was too tired. I should not have driven here last night”—that is worth sharing, so the factors and options can be discussed.

Thinking back, our best IPNs include five elements:

1. events, terrain, conditions, equipment and human factors leading up to the incident
2. the event
3. what was done well
4. actions, equipment and anything that might have helped avoid the specific incident
5. proposed changes to routines or operating procedures that would help avoid similar incidents. Sometimes there are no recommendations.

I think of an incident peer narrative as horizontal communication. It is different from and does not replace upward communication of an accident or injury to management, regulatory agencies, etc. An Incident Peer Narrative is simply a story of a risky workplace incident in which communication to peers and learning are optimized—to help prevent future injuries.