

The Recency Trap: Why Your Last Incident Shouldn't Define Your Safety Strategy



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April 2026 · 6 min read

A serious incident happens. It gets immediate attention — as it should. A root cause is identified. And action follows: new rules, new procedures, organization-wide trainings. From the outside, it looks like strong safety management. But there's a hidden risk buried inside this pattern — one that most organizations never question.

The risk is overgeneralizing the last incident.

When findings from a limited number of events are translated into broad, sweeping corrective actions, organizations often create the illusion of control rather than actual risk reduction. The last incident becomes the priority — even when it doesn't represent the most significant SIF exposure in the operation.

Systems get heavier, but not necessarily safer. More procedures, more controls — yet limited impact on the high-energy hazards that actually drive serious outcomes.

The Psychology Behind the Pattern

There's a name for what's happening here: **recency bias**. The most recent event feels like the most important one. It dominates attention, drives budget allocation, and shapes the corrective action agenda — often at the expense of quieter, more dangerous exposures that haven't produced an event yet.

But incidents are not always representative of risk. This is especially true when it comes to serious injuries and fatalities, where outcomes are driven by exposure to high-energy hazards, not by frequency of occurrence. The most dangerous conditions in a facility may never have produced a recordable — precisely because the margin between exposure and catastrophic outcome is razor-thin and largely a matter of chance.

The more effective question isn't "What just happened?" It's: "Where are we exposed to the highest potential severity — even if nothing has happened yet?"

From Reaction to Exposure-Driven Prioritization

This is the shift that leading organizations are making. Not abandoning incident investigation — but refusing to let it be the sole driver of safety strategy. The move is toward a model that prioritizes where energy, exposure, and consequence converge, regardless of whether an event has occurred.

Incident-driven reactions	→	Exposure-driven prioritization
Generalized corrective actions	→	Targeted controls at the point of risk
Hindsight-based safety management	→	Real-time visibility into the hazards that matter most

When safety teams can see where high-energy interactions are happening — pedestrians in forklift zones, vehicles in blind intersections, unguarded loading areas — they gain the ability to act before the event, not after. The corrective action isn't a new training module. It's an engineered intervention at the exact point where severity potential is highest.

Making the Invisible Visible

The hardest part of SIF prevention has always been this: the exposures that carry the highest severity potential are often the ones that are least visible. They don't generate near-miss reports. They don't show up in lagging indicators. They exist in the gap between what we measure and what actually creates risk.

Closing that gap requires moving beyond event-based safety entirely — toward systems that continuously map exposure, quantify severity potential, and direct attention to the places where intervention will have the greatest impact on preventing life-altering outcomes.

Safety doesn't improve by reacting more. It improves by making the invisible visible — before the event, not after.

The question every safety leader should be asking: Are we managing **yesterday's incident** — or tomorrow's exposure?