

How Overcoming the “Burnt Toast” Syndrome Can Improve Your Safety and Training Results

by Mack Turner, CUSP, CUSA

I have a beautiful and caring better half. She is always there for me. One of the things she does for me is make breakfast. Now I am an old country boy, so any old breakfast won't do. I want meat, eggs, potatoes, and toast, and she is happy to prepare them for me.

One morning, as I sat down for the breakfast that she prepared, I looked at my plate and right on top was the toast...and it was burnt. Now, I **DO NOT** like my toast burnt. How dare she, after all these years, try to feed me burnt toast. So, what did I do? I grabbed the jam and smiled, I thanked my better half for my breakfast, and I ate the burnt toast.

I then got up from the table and left for work. While I was driving to work, I could not help but think that my burnt toast was somewhat symbolic of our employee safety programs, as well as the behavior and culture of our employees.

Culture

There is a funny thing about our culture. This is the same when we are at work. Our “culture” is a 24/7 thing. The culture we have at work is also the culture we have at home. That's right. Our true, personal culture starts and ends at home, and we carry those behaviors to work. We are, after all, off the job and at home more hours of each day.

We all have company Safety Rules, Standard Operating Procedures, and Work Methods that are designed around keeping all our employees safe. In spite of all these directives, our safety culture is not what we want it to be. At home we have established rules and corrective actions that may or may not work.

We have all heard our employees say something like, “Safe behavior takes too much time,” or “We have always done this task this way,” or “I don't have the right tool, so I will improvise.” In other words, we are all willing to accept “Burnt Toast.”

And the real sad thing is that as leaders and heads of household, we are too often willing to accept these unsafe behaviors and conditions. We justify our “Burnt Toast” by saying to ourselves things like, “I have too much to do to focus on employee or family safety,” or “There are too many rules,” or “We need to hurry to get this done so we can go home or on vacation.” Let's explore some examples.

Mowing the lawn

We can start with a task that applies both at work and at home. If you were asked to mow the lawn at work, here is what you would expect. OSHA says that we have to do a hazard analysis and then train on the hazards and hazard abatement. So, we would get the owner's manual, make a list of hazards and hazard abatement techniques, and train our employee on how to run the mower, its hazards, and our hazard abatement plan. Then we would issue PPE like hearing protection, eye protection, hand, arm, leg and foot protection. We would issue a spill kit in case of oil or gas spillage and remind our employee to take regular breaks and watch for heat exhaustion.

But, when we mow the grass at home or assign one of our children to do the task, the task is done without ever going through the hazards. It's done in just a t-shirt, shorts, and flip flops with a favorite beverage in hand, and we are good. Am I right? We accept the burnt toast when it is at home, where we are at the greatest risk, not to mention we are enabling our other family members to accept the burnt toast as normal and endorsed by us.

Minimum Approach Distance - OSHA 1910.269(l)(3) and Working Position - OSHA 1910.269(l)(5)

OSHA 1910.269(l)(3)(i) The employer shall establish minimum approach distances no less than the distances computed by table R-3 for AC systems. Using table R-3, we can assume that a worker cannot approach an energized part in an average distribution system closer than 2' 2" without some protection such as gloves and sleeves. And by also using 1910.269(l)(5)(i), the employer shall ensure that each employee, to the extent that other safety-related conditions at the worksite permit, works in a position from which a slip or shock will not bring the employee's body into contact with exposed, uninsulated parts, energized at a potential different than the employees. I was taught that I always worked overhead energized conductors and other parts from a position below the conductors and parts while wearing gloves and sleeves. This would allow compliance with both of these standards. However, I routinely see workers working energized distribution systems out of the bucket with their hands and arms right in front of their chests. This work method is a violation of MAD and work position rules, and it is inherently unsafe. We eat, and enable our workers to eat, this burnt toast and like it, knowing it is not right, but we easily justify that the burnt toast tastes alright with a little jam or honey.

Moving Forward

This brings us to what we can do to get rid of the "Burnt Toast" syndrome. First, we have to acknowledge that we really don't mind the burnt toast, while also realizing we should not accept the burnt toast anymore. After all, it represents a culture that accepts unsafe behaviors and conditions, and in the long run, that could lead to a catastrophe.

Be the change

This starts at home. When you wake up in the morning, go look in the mirror and say out loud to yourself, "I don't like burnt toast and I am going to be the change agent. It starts right now, and I am committed to be the example of change at home and in my workplace." Repeat this each and every morning.

If not you, then who?

Whether you are at home or work, you are a leader, and leaders need to actively lead. The best way to lead is by example. We all know that our kids and co-workers look up to us. If we accept the burnt toast in our lives, they will, as well. As leaders, we enable them according to how we lead.

Always choose the safest way to perform a task

Of course, there are many ways to perform the myriad of tasks that we each perform every day. If we consciously take time to figure out the safest way to complete each task, then discuss with all who are involved in the task, and mentor others to perform the task in the safest way possible, we will progress to the point that we will not accept burnt toast anymore. We will all be working in a way that prevents injury.

Head in the game, 24/7

Have you ever left your place of employment after a long day at work, gotten in your vehicle and started down the road to your home, and next thing you know you are sitting in your driveway? You can't remember the stop signs, the stop lights, the left and right turns you made, let alone the other cars and pedestrians on the roadway. Scary, right? Burnt toast is sneaky like that. You might have gotten by without eating it this time, but what are the odds that keeps happening? If we don't keep our head engaged with what our hands and body are doing at all times, you might just have a regular diet (Try three times a day, forever!) of burnt toast.

Start with the little things

We also need to acknowledge that burnt toast is just a little thing, but as we know, if we do not take care of the little things, big things happen. Burnt toast is a very little thing that, left unchecked, could grow into an unruly and uncontrollable culture that will step into our lives and the lives of co-workers, family and friends, that is unhealthy, dangerous, and could even become fatal.

The End Goal

We, as leaders, fathers, mothers, friends, and co-workers need to communicate to all family members, friends, and fellow employees that “burnt toast” will not be accepted anymore, and the expectation is that all families, friends, and employees need to recognize unsafe conditions and behaviors and remediate them.

Life will continue to hand us “burnt toast” and that is alright. However, we cannot just smile, accept that, and say “Pass the jam.” To have a true and meaningful safety culture, we have to step up and refuse anything less than safe conditions and behavior in our homes and workplaces.

Now of course, I am never going to criticize my beloved if she burns my toast, but we can’t ignore less than our best **in the workplace**. At work, do we accept less than correct because we don’t want to be seen as criticizing? It’s okay to overlook simple shortcomings at home to preserve the union and a comfortable place to sleep. But not expecting and ensuring that everything is right in the workplace does not preserve safety. Eventually, covering workplace shortcomings with sweeteners will come back to hurt you or a co-worker.

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Mack Turner’s career spans over 25 years in the Electric, Gas and Communications Utility Industry. Mack has specialized in the Safety, Risk and Leadership disciplines and is focused on positive culture change. Mack’s experience includes corporate safety management, field safety management, fleet management, electrical utility craft training, leadership development and soft skills, behavioral-based safety training and consulting, and professional public and keynote speaking. Mack has worked with large utility contractors, large electric and gas utilities, as well as small co-ops. Mack Turner is currently the Executive Director of the Institute for Safety in Powerline Construction (**ISPC**) www.ispconline.com, a non-profit Association focusing safety in the utility industry and he works throughout the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America. Mack served as the President/Board Chairman for nine years, and he is a founding member for the Utility Safety Operations Leadership Network (**USOLN**) www.usoln.org, the sponsoring organization of the Certified Utility Safety Professional (**CUSP**) accreditation. Mack is a Certified Utility Safety Professional (CUSP), Certified Utility Safety Administrator (CUSA), and holds advanced safety certificates from the National Safety Council as well as various safety certificates from Red Rocks Community College. Mack currently resides in Nacogdoches, Texas.