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Pre-Vacation Error Traps

Error Traps increase the probability that an individual could make an error (or mistake) that unintentionally results in a bad outcome. These error traps often lay hidden, ready to spring when we least expect it. In order to deal with the error traps, and reduce the probability of a mistake, we must know what they look like, what they feel like, what they will do to you, and what you can do about them. We must watch for clues, or triggers, to tell us that a trap exists. Once we recognize a trap, we can easily figure out ways to avoid it, so we don't fall in and cause harm to ourselves, a family member, a teammate, or an asset.

Please use this article as a short synopsis that you, your managers, supervisors, peers, and family can use to facilitate a discussion to raise awareness and make this a safer holiday season.

There are three very prominent error traps that, while they exist all year, are *especially* heightened just before a vacation. Three of the heightened error traps to watch for are Stress, Distractions, and "End of Shift." Let's discuss each of these, and we'll even throw in a bonus error trap at the end!

TRAP #1 Stress – That physiological transference from pressure (where many people can thrive in performance) to stress (where most people do NOT perform well). Stress can be driven from either external sources or from internal sources. It is important to understand that while we may not be able to take away the stressor, we can still identify the triggers, and use some simple tools to reduce the probability of a mistake. Stress is particularly heightened as we prepare for vacation from both internal and external sources. We may get focused on the part of the vacation that we aren't looking forward to, and the stress of having to do those things drives stress at work before we leave. We may not be looking forward to spending time with people we rarely see, and that stresses us out in advance of actually seeing them. We may be thinking about all of the chores we have saved up for "vacation" and become overwhelmed, impacting us at work before we leave.

- Some of the triggers for stress are deep sighs, lack of focus, impatience, frustration with conditions or people, outbursts, fast heart rate, or increased blood pressure.
- To combat stress as an error trap: take deep breaths and hold them and release them slowly to let your body and mind settle down, slow the pace of tasks by visualizing and verbalizing the actions, take a quick break to refocus your mind, and ask someone for help.

TRAP #2 Distractions – Distractions may be the most common error trap when getting ready for vacation. They occur when our brain is trying to do the task at hand, but it is also trying to think about other things. Distractions try to force our brain to multi-task, which is extremely difficult for most people. The challenge is that many of us THINK we can multi-task, but the physiological reality is that very few humans can accomplish multiple, conscious, simultaneous thoughts and actions, and do them successfully. Error and mistake rates skyrocket when we try to do this, and this drives incidents. Mental distractions could include thinking about where you are going and what you will be doing on vacation instead of focusing your attention on a task that needs it. Physical distractions may be heightened because your peers or colleagues may already be returning from their vacations, or even trying to describe to you where they will be going before they go.

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- Some of the triggers for distractions are: lack of focus, forgetting where you are in a task, frequent interruptions by others, catching yourself with your mind somewhere else other than the task at hand, or switching back and forth between tasks.
- To combat distractions as an error trap: Slow down and focus your mind on the task at hand. Slow the pace of the task by verbalizing actions and consciously following processes. When you feel like it is wandering or you get distracted, stop or slow the task until you can refocus. Verbalize the steps in a task to focus your mind on the task at hand.

TRAP #3 End of Shift – (Also Known as *Goal Line Fever*)– As a vacation approaches, we may try to multi-task as we try to do all we have left before we leave, which also increases our time pressure and therefore increases our error rate. Thinking about the vacation (positively or negatively) can be a distraction that is very hard to see and manage. We may get interrupted by family or friends during key tasks at work, especially as we get closer to and prepare for the time off. The end of shift trap interacts with several others, making it a key trap during the vacation season.

- Some of the triggers for end of shift include: thinking about the vacation during work or tasks, taking calls when you normally wouldn't, worrying about family or travel, or getting your mind ready for the celebration.
- To combat the trap of end of the shift: slow the pace of the task by verbalizing actions and consciously following processes. Verbalization forces your mind to focus on the task and reduces error probability. Don't forget to stop and seek out help if you find yourself confused, overwhelmed, or unsure!

Vacation periods can make our time schedules busier than normal — the risk to a safe operation increases since the probability for errors increases during that time.

All these traps impact us in different ways related to our personality tendencies. People who have predominantly task-oriented personalities react differently to distractions and stress than those who have more people-oriented personalities. For more information on your own and your teams' personality tendencies, visit www.error-reduction.com and “Discover your E-Colors.”

Bonus Trap: Infrequent or first-time tasks – Very often during vacation season we may have to cover for other workers and end up doing tasks that we might have never done or may not have done in the last six months. These tasks significantly increase the probability that someone may make an error at a rate of up to 50%!

Slow down, verbalize your actions, follow processes step by step, and absolutely stop and ask for help, even when it is uncomfortable!

Make this a safe, **incident-free**, and fun vacation season!