Are you drifting?

Highlights

- **Procedural Drift** happens any time people routinely deviate from official practices.

- Not every instance of procedural drift has immediate consequences, but over time the drift can become serious.

- Well-written, up-to-date policies and procedures can help prevent procedural drift.

How many of us regularly drive 5 MPH over the speed limit? How many have even passed police cars while speeding and have not been pulled over? Has exceeding the speed limit become so common even the police abide by the new norm? Why is this?

There is a concept in safety investigations known as **Procedural Drift**. It happens any time people routinely deviate from official practices to perform a task, and over time the deviation slowly becomes the new established practice. Procedural drift is more common than you might think.

There are reasons for procedural drift. Workers can see certain procedures as too burdensome and inconsistent with how work is really done. Policies and procedures can become outdated. Employees can view lack of consequences as a sign it is safe to stray from the rules. As a result, the drift away from formal policy can become such a regular practice that everyone accepts it as the new norm.

Not every instance of procedural drift has immediate consequences, but over time the drift away from good business practice can become serious. A simple example is when supervisors, without direct knowledge of employees’ work, approve employee timesheets. Maybe a few times here and there seem harmless. However, when this practice becomes an accepted norm, some employees could take advantage of the lack of knowledge, increasing the chance of errors or fraud.

Preventing procedural drift is rooted in the policies and procedures themselves. To minimize procedural drift, follow these tips:

- **Ensure policy and procedure are realistic.** Policy developers must have a thorough understanding of the user and the business process. They should strongly consider getting stakeholder input in policy development and update.

- **Review policies often.** Outdated policy and procedure can seem irrelevant and provide justification for workers to drift away.

- **Verify the policy or procedure is being followed.** Observe how users apply the policy. Find where they deviate from standard procedure and why. Enforce and reward compliance.

- **Explain why policy or procedure should be followed.** When workers understand the reason for a process or control, it is easier for them to abide by the policy.

- **Encourage a culture of professionalism and pride in following policy and procedure.** Management should walk-the-talk and not promote procedural drift. Everyone should hold others accountable for complying.

People are good at finding faster, more efficient ways of doing things. If the rules are overly burdensome or do not reflect the reality of the job, they will often drift away from them.

**Suggested action steps:** Think about your agency’s policies and procedures. Are they always followed? If not, why not? If you are developing or updating a policy, procedure, standard, or rule; take steps to avoid procedural drift.

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