

Inability to Admit Limitations

A Natural Gas System Controller volunteered some information during a control room team training session. He was on duty when high pressure gas was accidentally introduced into a low pressure gas system. The Controller was not able to operate valves on the low pressure gas system remotely from the SCADA system. He could only monitor and notify field personnel. When he received the high pressure alarms, he called the local field person. The Controller had fulfilled his responsibility. The accident report is available at:

<https://www.nts.gov/investigations/AccidentReports/Pages/PAR1902.aspx>

Then he said something interesting about teamwork and learning. Since he had never seen a similar situation, he asked others in the control room to look at what was occurring and help him understand what turned out to be an emergency operational mode. He readily admitted the limitations of his knowledge and asked for help. I wondered that day how many of us would have done the same.

The “Inability to Admit Limitations” is a reflection of a “can do” mentality or a “Lone Ranger” personality. Some people, myself included, do not like to ask for help. As I have learned on two recent occasions, not admitting limitations causes problems and may have significant consequences. Each of us has our limits and those limits will affect our performance in safety-critical jobs. We might be affected by fatigue, stress, health problems, workload, pressure, lack of knowledge, or other performance shaping factors.

In 1974, as a new employee, someone gave me a quick lesson in line locating and then sent me to mark a pipeline before a contractor began work. The problem was the lesson was in the driveway of a facility and the one pipeline was under the center of the driveway. It was easy to find. The pipeline on the right of way was under a junkyard so I got all kinds of signals from the line locator. I was not confident I had located and marked the pipeline accurately.

Did I admit my doubts and ask for assistance? I did not, and my line markers were off by several feet, because I did not pick up on a bend in the pipe. The line was hit by a backhoe and had some damage. This was long before the current age of kinder and gentler pipeliners. I was criticized, cursed, and ridiculed. Have you ever made a similar mistake due to lack of experience that led to poor judgment?

We have to be willing to recognize and admit limitations. Some ways to address the our limitations include:

- Assess your physical, mental, and emotional limits
- Do not overestimate your capabilities
- Listen to your body’s warning signs
- Get adequate rest and practice stress relieving tactics
- Get over your pride, self-will, and fear of what others think
- Admit to yourself when you do not know the correct thing to do
- Seek the correct answers if you are in doubt
- Use procedures and other job aids
- Ask for help

