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World Day for Safety and Health at Work
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Risk or Save, You Choose!

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Greetings to you on this the ILO World Day for Safety and Health under the theme is Safety and Health at Work Can Save Lives. I wish to applaud my fellow safety and health professionals around the globe for working assiduously to save lives at work and reduce the global accident rate as much as we can. It is clear by the title of our job, that we are in this profession to protect the life and limbs of our co-workers. Our mandate is to ensure that everyone returns home safe and healthy every day. It is even more imperative during this COVID-19 pandemic that everyone appreciate the importance of various safety, health, and hygiene measures to control the spread of the virus. To save lives we follow a simple yet thorough hierarchy of controls.

What is this hierarchy of control? The hierarchy is the safety and health professional's bible for dealing with any hazard and its accompanying risk. Before safety and health professionals consult the hierarchy, they first access the employees' and business' exposure
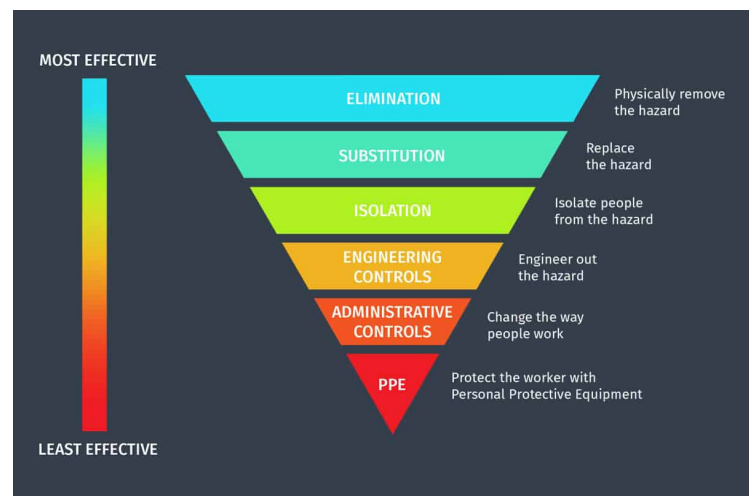

Fig. 1 The Hierarchy of Controls

to the risk. They then analyse the likelihood of the exposure coupled with the severity of the consequences. This identifies how critical the risk may be which must then be aligned to the level of control utilised.

The hierarchy of controls as depicted above, starts with the elimination of the risk. If the risk is severely critical and imminent, it must be eliminated. Coronavirus has proven to be very critical and intensely imminent. Therefore, if we can kill the Coronavirus (COVID-19) then we have executed the first and preferred control. Therefore, when you utilize disinfectants that are capable of killing 99.9% of viruses inclusive of the Coronavirus, you have acted to eliminate the hazard.

If elimination cannot be executed, the next step would be to substitute the hazard. I am most sure, that if we could substitute COVID-19 with the seasonal flu we would quickly opt for that instead. However, this is not a plausible control measure at this point.

Substitution seeks to replace a more hazardous substance or environment with a less hazardous one. Therefore, as opposed to working in an office where physical distancing cannot be practiced, we have substituted our offices for a table in the comfort of our homes. Effectively, businesses substituted the hazardous environment for a less hazardous one.

The third stage is isolation, this is where the effort is focussed on separating people from the hazard. We have witnessed the Barbadian government try their best to contain persons in various isolation facilities. Additionally, we have been advised to physically distance ourselves from others. While this is not isolation in its truest sense, it still isolates the virus from spreading outside of one's personal space. Once you have isolated the hazard, the likelihood of the risks occurring can be significantly reduced.

When the previous measures are not accessible, the next step would be to engineer a control measure. In this case we have seen supermarkets and businesses erecting transparent barriers between their frontline employees and their customers. They have designed a barrier between the person and the possible risk.

The categories of controls listed thus far are the most effective way to reduce the likelihood and severity of the risk with the last two controls categories being the least effective. However, in the short-term if these measures become a practiced and reinforced behaviour, they can prove to be very effective in conjunction with other control categories. "Administrative Controls" is the title given to measures such as training, repeat communication, warnings, and signage. These measures are created to help address the behaviours of people.

People can be very unpredictable beings and therefore it is hard to control or always predict their response to risks. We have witnessed various entities post warnings, signage, videos, and pictograms to communicate the risks of contracting coronavirus as well as how best to protect yourselves. I wish to applaud the many Barbadians heeding this advice, However, to the others who seem to be disregarding the advice, please listen and let us unite to do what is right and hygienic.

The final control category is the utilisation of personal protective equipment (PPE). During COVID-19 period, the world saw an increase in the use of masks, respirators, and gloves, just to name a few. In the medical sector, hospitals in the United States are complaining of their lack of PPE. While PPE is the least effective safety control measure, it is the most easily accessible. The effectiveness of this measure is yet again reliant of the user's behaviour. I see persons in lines at supermarkets with their masks, but then they pull them off to talk to the person beside them; this defeats the purpose. I also witnessed on two occasions persons wearing gloves out of the supermarkets but then take them off incorrectly by touching the palms and fingertips of the glove. To make matters worse they left the gloves in the trolly and placed the trolly back into the storage area. Not only must you wear the PPE to prevent the spread of COVID-19, but you must put them on and take them off correctly.

In conclusion, whether your organisation has a safety professional onboard or a well-trained safety committee as you must have according to the law, the adherence to the hierarchy of control is our best chance at saving lives. We must start from the top and work our way down to PPE and not the other way around. We must do what we can today to ensure we save lives.

"...businesses including government units can consider special leave..."

Source of Hierarchy image: https://tapintosafety.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Hierarchy_Pyramid.jpg