

MIND YOUR SAFETY EB September 2007

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By Dave Smith Human beings are creatures of habit: both good habits and bad habits. One of our bad habits is accepting risks when it is totally unnecessary. When I was a working electrician, my main concern was electrocution and, because I didn't want that to happen, I worked carefully. PPE was unheard of in those days, so summer gear consisted of a T-shirt and jeans. Though I've never been burned, I have had three shocks that were bloody painful; thankfully, all were from my hand to arm, elbow or shoulder, and not across my heart or head. The hand-to-elbow shock laid me on my back; the one through my arm dropped me three rungs down a stepladder (but not into the 480 subpanel that was open in front of me, thankfully), and the shoulder one made me miss a slow-pitch tournament. Looking back at those occurrences I realized I could have easily deenergized the equipment, but I had just fallen into the habit of working live. I thought I would be safe by being careful, but this assumes everything will be fine; that I wouldn't get distracted, or slip or drop anything, etc. That's a dangerous assumption. In my courses, I put this question to all of my students: How many of you have ever worked on something live when you could just have easily deenergized it? In my 27 years of training electricians, I continue to have a 100% affirmative answer. I then ask, "How many of you have had such a situation in the last month?" On average, over half of the students respond that they had. This always leads to an energized discussion (pardon the pun). Granted, there are situations in which some manager or other refuses to deenergize the equipment, but we'll deal with that another time. For now I'm talking about turning the power Off at every opportunity; to stop accepting risks just because you are qualified and experienced, and have done similar jobs in the past without incident. Statistically, the more times you take a certain risk, the more likely you are to suffer at the hands of that risk. Knowing this, and understanding your habits, can give you a powerful edge with your personal accident prevention program. Look at it this way... if you regularly drive on a busy freeway, your risks are right in front of your face. You are constantly adjusting your actions according to the traffic risks around you. To manage these risks, you keep your headlights and windshield clean so as to see things more clearly; you ensure your taillights are working so that others will see you; you adjust your mirrors so as to eliminate any blind spots; you continuously check forwards, backwards and sideways for hazards; you signal your turns to let others know what you are doing before you do it; and, in times of perceived danger, you sound your horn. Propelling two tons of metal and glass at freeway speeds through a stampede of others is a high-risk activity, and if you have not learned good driving habits and practise them constantly, then you're not long for this world. Just like driving down the freeway, electrical work is very risky and you need to think about the hazards all the time. Develop the good habit of never working on live equipment if you can avoid it. And, when someone asks you to work live, look them in the eye and ask, "Do you really want to take that risk?" After all, if something bad were to happen and you got hurt, there would be an investigation, equipment damage, downtime and, quite possibly, criminal charges. If you accept the live assignment, manage the risks as though you were behind the wheel on the freeway and, for Pete's sake, put on your PPE. Until next time, be ready, be careful and be safe. Dave Smith is president of CANADA TRAINING GROUP and has been providing consulting services to industry since 1980.