

A Safety Culture for Woodworking

Woodworking is inherently dangerous, so we need to constantly emphasise safety. The most dangerous tool, by far is the table saw. This is borne out by the regularity with which WWA club members injure their fingers. I guess there has been at least one injury every year. So, with another casualty in April this year, we need to continually remind each other of the need to work safely.

I found this article on the Fine Woodworking web site (<http://www.finewoodworking.com/item/25540/when-you-have-your-accident>) that I think is a very good safety awareness talk:

When You Have Your Accident...

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My apologies for being so upfront with the news. Most new woodworkers show surprise on their faces when they hear this. But it's true. It's not a question of if you'll have an accident. It is only a question of when. So many factors are at work here of course.

There is your inexperience working against you. If you've had more time in the shop, then you have your experience working against you. You see, as I tell my students, there are two people most at risk here on the [insert name of tool], the newest student and me. The newest student often doesn't know what he's about to do wrong. I, on the other hand, am at risk after so many years that I can grow complacent and let my guard down. Either way you can end up doing something stupid and avoidable. Therefore I have instituted rules for myself that I adhere to as religiously as any ex-altar boy can.

Your Stupid Days

On your Smart Days, when the Sudoku melts away in a blur of numbers before you or Will Shortz is taking it in his for the speed of your puzzle solving, on those days, you could push boards through the machines with your elbows and get away with it. You're sharp, you're alert, you're focused on the work in front of you. Those days you have some general safety habits and you're good to go.

But it's on your Stupid Days that you need diligence. It is on your worst days, your triple low days, when you are distracted and not all there that you need iron clad habits. Those days when you're still cursing the idiot that cut you off in traffic. Or you're worrying about your taxes or dinner or why the banks want to charge you for too low a balance or any number of things except the imminent danger you have placed yourself into by walking into the wood-shop.

It is on those days you need habits in place. Habits that even with a hangover the size of Rhode Island you will not disobey. For it is those habits that will save you when you have your accident.

Habits for Your Stupid Days

Here are some simple habits to adopt around machinery. When these conditions occur, then a little bell must go off in your head and you must pay attention. As I also tell my students around a band saw, your butcher uses one of these. Pay attention.

No sudden movements around a blade. Do not dust off the table of any machine when it is running. Always use a brush and not your hand to brush away sawdust. It seems simple but you'd be surprised how many people brush off their table with the blade running.

Wear eye protection. *Wear eye protection.* ***Wear eye protection.*** Not a misprint. You cannot blink fast enough. Something in your eye all day long is better than a Zen retreat when it comes to focusing your attention. You will be in pain all day and every time you blink. **Wear eye protection.**

When using chisels, always stay behind the business end of the tool. That way you can't poke yourself. Get in front and you're at risk no matter how smart you think you are.

Use push-sticks when pieces get too small. When is too small? On the table saw when ripping, if the fence is closer to the blade than the width of my fist, I get a push stick. Even in the middle of a cut, if I discover my mistake, I stop and get a push stick. I stop the feed, hold the work carefully and having my push sticks always close by, I can reach for one and use it.

On the jointer, if my hand will even graze the jointer blade guard, I get a push stick. I have four push sticks of different sizes close by for use. Use them for thin pieces, long pieces that need to be held flat, extra thin pieces and extra long pieces. But have something between you and the blade if you're going to get close to it.

I never get my fingers close enough to touch the housing of the planer while it's running. That's too close to the blades. I stand out of the way of the planer when it's running and never, ever, look inside it while it's cutting to see just how things are going.

Go head laugh. Like that gal with the long hair who turned on the drill press and yanked out a top knot because she wasn't wearing a hat or hadn't tucked her hair in. Remove your jewellery, men take off those neckties, get rid of the rings, bracelets, amulets, and charms you wear throughout the work day to ward off evil spirits. Take them off and be safe. Use a fence on a drill press to prevent pieces from spinning if you cannot clamp them down.

On the table saw, stand out of the way of kickback but stay on the left side of the fence so you can see what's happening there. Usually a problem starts at the fence and ends up with kickback at the blade. Always know where your hands are at on a table saw jig, crosscut sled, or rip cut. Never get them behind the blade.

These are just a few things that I try to remember when I walk into the shop. It's like knowing which hand is your left one. Have that information always at the ready and you will protect yourself the day you do something stupid. You probably have other methods for keeping yourself safe. I've just scratched the surface here. Let me know your habits for your stupid days and we'll all be safer.