



Regulatory Compliance

Ask an Expert: OSHA Myths vs. Facts

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What You Need to Know

OSHA is a complex organization with detailed rules.
Some well-known rules, such as the “6-foot rule,” are not real.
Myths about citations and handling chemicals are also addressed.

A conversation with Shelly Baize, safety specialist at MSC Industrial Supply, about the “6-foot rule” and other myths.

Workplace safety should be top of mind for all professionals, yet some workplaces aren't in compliance with basic safety guidelines. Part of this is due to pervasive myths and ongoing confusion about the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's (OSHA) standards of conduct.



Shelly Baize

Shelly Baize, a safety specialist with MSC Industrial Supply, helped set the record straight on some common OSHA misconceptions. Because of constantly changing regulations, there's always room for improvement, says Baize, but a good place to start is by clarifying complex or confusing rules. It's a process that can help managers create a safer work environment for their employees, and ensure OSHA compliance.

Fact or Myth: OSHA commonly shuts down worksites.

Baize: Myth

It really depends on what the hazard is. It rarely happens, but if it's a life-or-death situation, they can shut you down until you fix whatever they've found wrong. I've seen a situation where someone was severely injured in an explosion. They might shut down the piece of equipment that caused the injury, but they won't shut down the entire operation. If it's a serious hazard and a company has been warned and warned, OSHA can write you a citation. And, while we're debunking myths, it's worth noting that OSHA is not funded by these citations; they are a government organization funded by taxpayers. They don't give out citations just to make money.

Fact or Myth: There is a "4-foot rule" when working near edges.

Baize: Myth

The workplace safety myth here is that 4 feet, or distance alone, is the only safeguard needed when working near an unprotected side or edge of a building. OSHA has determined that there is no safe distance that would be equivalent to actual fall protection, and a nonconforming guardrail 15 feet from the edge should be in place. To be compliant, employers should prohibit work between this rail and the edge. This is often neglected when working on a roof but shouldn't be.

Fact or Myth: It's acceptable to work on a ladder without being tied off.

Baize: Myth

There's a myth that you can work on a ladder without being tied off. I could *climb* a ladder to get somewhere without protection, but if I'm *working* on a ladder, then I'd have to be tied off with a full-body harness and a lanyard that hooks onto something that would catch me in case of a fall.

Fact or Myth: Workers should be within 10 seconds of an eyewash station.

Baize: Fact

Eyewash stations must also be in the immediate area when chemicals are being handled or stored. You have to be able to get to an eyewash station within 10 seconds of an exposure, and there must be at least 15 minutes of constant water flow from the device. This is something that a lot of companies know; they just don't do it.

Outside of facts and myths, does being in compliance with regulations mean worksites are actually safe?

Baize: Looking compliant doesn't mean you are compliant, and good intentions don't necessarily mean you're following through. For instance, I went into a facility in Denver, and a guy had all his record keeping, all his trainings, and then when I went out into the field, it was a disaster. Fall protection, respirators, chemical storage, lockout/tagout—you're dealing with so many things that you have to stay vigilant.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

What questions do you have about OSHA facts and myths?

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