

Attentionally Avoiding Traps – and Trips

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By [Robert Pater](#) | Mar 01, 2015

When attention slips, so can we. Likely because the mind leads the body. Attention is much more than solely "mental" – it drives what our body does. Every action begins with our brain sending signals to activate specific muscles for accomplishing selected tasks such as reaching, grabbing, lifting, or walking. In other words, what we see + what we intend + what we direct all lead to what we actually do. Understanding this, internal martial arts masters instruct students to initially focus on affecting attacker's perceptions: "First move their mind in order to move their body." Similarly, skid control trainers remind drivers to "*Stare*, don't *steer*, into a turn." That where you focus is where you'll wind up heading (termed "target fixation" in aviation.)

Turning attention toward preventing the persistent problems of slips, trips, and falls, I'm sure you've seen similar statistics over and over again – they don't seem to change much. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were 223,700 cases involving falls, slips, trips in 2012. But how many more went unreported? Off the record, numerous corporate Safety pros reveal these are among the most underreported incidents. And what about those slip or trip injuries that are coded differently because they result in strains and sprains or are "bodily reaction" (basically a slip/trip/balance issue that didn't result in impact)?

Further, no surprise, this issue affects companies wherever people walk, worldwide. For example, Great Britain's Health & Safety Executive reported that in 2013-14, falls and slips & trips accounted for over a third (35 percent) of all employee injuries.

Standard responses to these persistent problems are good and all and have

undoubtedly managed to keep slips/trips/falls from becoming worse. But even with best mats/signs/flooring/reminders and footwear, the level of these injuries has still clearly been holding steady at a dull roar. And, regrettably, there are some convinced nothing else *could* be done, that these injuries are inevitable and ultimately unpreventable. In counterpoint, strongest leaders know that all problems have solutions, even if they haven't yet discovered them.

Consider another approach: placing people more in control of their own safety by transferring to them the right mental and physical skills. This has shown to consistently prevent slips/trips/falls; it begins, as many things do, with attention.

Performance psychologist Robert Nideffer sees attention as having two dimensions: width and direction. Width means its field – what you see and/or hear or smell or feel – can be narrow or wide. Direction refers to where you focus, either internally (thoughts, recalling procedures, dwelling on nagging pain in part of body, etc.) or externally (objects strewn on the ground ahead and more). We may be too narrowly focused to see that we could have walked around that slippery area or trying to be so externally aware that we didn't notice we were holding our breath (raising tension and sapping balance) when traversing an at-risk surface. I've found that a high-level ability to prevent slips, trips, and falls relies on being able to combine and shift between attentional fields, appropriately scanning for surface changes or obstacles with a wide/external view, then zooming in with a narrow external view – to note, for example, how elevator floor and threshold are at slightly different heights – *while* maintaining a wide/internal sense of balance.

While this may sound like a pretty tall order, we all already do this to some degree. The takeaway is this is a combo skillset that is neither haphazard nor hereditary; attention control can definitely be improved with the right practices. Which can, in turn, greatly alleviate these potentially daily injuries.

Now consider that physical balance is brain-regulated with strong attentional components. Dr. Roger Sperry, winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine/Physiology, demonstrated that 90 percent (!) of the brain's energy output is used for maintaining balance in space.

Stress is an additional factor, because it narrows vision/attention (resulting in tunnel vision, like walking with blinders at the sides of your temples) and so contributes to slips, trips, and falls. Trips come from unseen traps – it's the small things that get you – typically obstacles on the ground at ankle level and below (running into something thigh-high may hurt but is unlikely to cause a trip). And have you heard of an upset or emotionally/mentally distracted person running into something that was otherwise plainly in sight? Or a worker not recalling prevention methods she's

been taught because her mind's preoccupied with something else? Of course, these things only happen to *others* (LOL).

And aging workers are especially at risk for slips, trips, and falls. Some primary reasons? 1) Sway studies indicate that it takes longer for older people to reestablish balance than younger people, likely due to age-related lessened sensitivity of vestibulo-cochlear nerves in the inner ear, which detect sideways leans, thereby triggering reestablishment of balance. 2) Sarcopenia, age-related loss of muscle strength, means leg strength may no longer be adequate to compensate for slight unbalancing that can result in any misstep. 3) Vision changes may make it harder to see (and therefore adjust to) surface changes or obstacles. 4) Cumulative loss of joint flexibility combined with soft-tissue collagen breakdown can hamper agility (for quick recovery). And more.

Regrettably, I can't transfer personal techniques for preventing slips/trips/falls in writing (or video) any more than can I try to help you experience the taste of a spice you've not yet tried. However, rest assured it's readily possible to help all kinds of workers of all ages learn how to better keep their balance while on the move and significantly reduce injuries from slips, trips and falls. But this has to emanate from leaders opening their mental vistas to provide for workers' learning the right skills for becoming more in mental and physical control of their own safety. Ultimately, real attention to highest-level Safety begins with leaders.

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