

The Reliability Center – Terminology Clarification Center

Confusing Terms #1: Incident Analysis versus Root Cause Analysis

Oftentimes we are all faced with new and/or old terminology that crops up and forces miscommunications because they are confusing and conflicting. Incident Analysis and Root Cause Analysis (RCA) are two such terms

Let's explore them in more depth and try to see which term is appropriate for our respective applications.

- A. **Incident Analysis** – Incident analysis is not a methodology to my knowledge. It is merely a description indicating that some type of analysis to be done on an INCIDENT. Now, what is an incident? The answer depends on who is providing the response. Regulatory agencies may have specific definitions as to what an “incident” may be. Operations also may have trigger points that they identify as an incident. The safety people have clearly defined events that class them as near misses, reportable, non-reportable, etc. While there may be a wide debate on what is an incident, most will agree that one characteristic of an “incident” should be that it is infrequent! We liken this characteristic to being synonymous with “sporadic”.

- B. **Root Cause Analysis** – RCA is a more descriptive term indicating the use of a disciplined methodology of some type. While the term RCA itself is generic in the sense that there are many different methodologies in the marketplace, it does indicate a structured approach of some type will be used on the problem at hand. RCA can be used in many more broad applications such as incidents, accidents, chronic events, sporadic events, etc. and is not limited to just “incidents”. RCA is a thought process that is not limited or constrained to a certain type of event being analyzed. Its commonality is with the human thought process and understanding how to use logic to solve any undesirable outcome.

So with the above terms, we actually can and do conduct RCA's on incidents. They are actually complementary terms as opposed to conflicting terms.