

UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, March 2013

Careless Chris Takes a Dive

By: Kitty

"This is going to take forever," Careless Chris moaned, staring at the spread of papers and files all over the table in front of her. "I can't believe we have to have all this sorted, indexed, copied, stamped, and filed by the end of today."

"Urgh," Brian agreed. Standing next to her and merely surveying the mess they had to deal with seemed to take as much energy as he had to give for the morning. At least a foot taller than Chris, his view of the mess they had to deal with was from a different perspective, but his conclusion was the same. "Could somebody have planned this a little better last month? Why is this suddenly a crisis?"

"And why is everybody else smart enough to stay home with the flu at the last minute? How come I never get the memo on these things?" Chris slumped into the rickety old chair that had been abandoned in the storage room where they were stationed for the moment. The chair listed to one side, and Chris looked down with misgivings at the short leg, split part of the way along its length and bound together with rusty wire. "I see they've spared no expense to make sure we have the tools to do our job."

Brian pushed the other chair over next to her, one broken caster grating on the tired linoleum as the flat-backed burnt orange monstrosity rattled across the floor on its other three wheels. Sitting down more gingerly, he pulled himself up to the edge of the table and reached for the first pile. "At least we have each other," he said with deliberately syrupy insincerity, and Chris had to laugh. "Besides, it could be worse. We could have been told to organize this whole room instead of just these documents."

"You are so right about that," Chris agreed, reaching for a stack herself. The over-stuffed shelves on all the walls around them held everything from moldering holiday decorations to an assortment of large, flimsy plastic trays that had to have once held fruit or veggie displays from Costco. Why anyone was saving the old party platters had never been questioned and so they accumulated along with all the other odds and ends that the office couldn't bear to dispose of. It had once been whispered that some day the old boxes everyone's computers had come in would be discarded, but nobody really believed that any more.

Silence reigned for a while, broken only by the whispering rustle of papers being moved and the occasional sigh or popping joint as one of them stretched briefly. Surfacing momentarily from her zone of concentration, Chris glanced over the table and was pleasantly surprised to see real evidence of order emerging from the chaos they had faced. Things looked better enough that she began to feel an encouraging sense of optimism for the first time that day and she took a deep, relaxing breath, not even minding the stale, dusty scent of the room. Her hand was halfway to the last pile of paper on her side of the table when the door behind them both banged open, startling her into a nervous gasp.

"The project review meeting has been moved up," Shellie announced peremptorily as she swept in. "Clean this up, get the boxes out of the way, and get over to the conference room right away." As supervisor she always felt it was necessary to give clear, specific directions, and prided herself on efficiency and inspiring prompt obedience. Not liking the dismayed expressions she was getting from Chris and Brian, she added aggressively, "We're all waiting on you over there, so don't take too long." With a somewhat self-satisfied nod to them both, she bustled back out and the door thudded shut behind her.

Brian rolled his eyes at the ceiling, though he was already gathering up the files. "We have got to put a bell on her one of these days."

"About thought I was going to have a heart attack," Chris agreed, pulling a box over near herself and layering in the sorted stacks. As soon as the box was full, she picked it up and moved over to the shelves. "Where can we put all this stuff? There isn't much room left and we don't have time to really mess with it."

His arms full of his own box, Brian paused next to her and scanned the wall. The box he was carrying was smaller, and looked like it would fit on a lower shelf, but the one Chris had was larger and there was only one spot he could see that it might go. "How about on top of that set of shelves over there?" he asked, pointing with his chin at a high open space near the ceiling.

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The door swung open again, nearly clipping his elbow. Shellie poked her head in long enough to make sure they were doing what she had asked, reminded them sharply, "We're waiting!" and unhelpfully vanished again.

"On our way," Brian replied, though it was already too late for Shellie to hear his reassurance. Kneeling quickly, he shoved the box he was holding into the niche he had spotted, pushing aside the empty original cell phone packaging cluttering the lower shelf. "Ow, my knees," he muttered as he pushed himself back up to his feet. Glancing over to where Chris still stood indecisively eyeing the high shelf he noticed she was hesitating and felt the urge to offer his help, but fear of Shellie's wrath was a more immediate concern. "I'll tell them you're on the way," he compromised, and dashed out the door.

"But..." Chris objected weakly, then realized she was going to have to find a solution on her own, and quickly at that. She was way too short to reach the high open area of the shelf, and knew she couldn't climb up to it and still hold onto the box. The pressure of having to get the job done right away was all the temptation she needed to reach over, grab the chair Brian had been sitting in, and drag it toward the wall. Pushing the chair into place, she got one foot up on it and tested her balance, shoving experimentally with her foot to make sure the wheeled base was braced securely against the bottom shelf. Getting a good grip on the box and taking a steadying breath, she quickly shifted her full weight forward as she stood on the chair and extended her arms. There was just enough forward momentum in the motion to allow her to leverage the box onto the top shelf and success was only inches away when the chair shifted underneath her. The broken caster collapsed, her body tipped far enough to the side in compensation to activate the stiff old spring so that the seat she was standing on tilted like a teeter-totter, and with a dreadful cry she fell backward, flailing her arms.

The box she had been holding went upward, spun, and distributed its contents in a blizzard of paper that fluttered and followed her to the floor, gently covering her, the box, and the overturned chair with a coating of futile work. Back in the corner, hidden by all the elements of her fall including the table she had nearly been brained by on her way down, Chris had the wind knocked out of her and couldn't raise enough voice to call for help. She twitched as the door noisily opened again, but instead of rescue it was Shellie, demanding to know what was taking so long.

It took a lot longer to get back to the meeting than Shellie had expected. By the time the paramedics had come and gone, taking Chris with them, and the paperwork for the incident had been filled out, the funds budgeted to fix the problems found by the subsequent OSHA inspection, the room clean-out arranged, the training on office safety scheduled, and all the rest of the consequences dealt with, the issue the meeting had been called for was a long-forgotten bit of minutia. When Chris finally was able to return to work, nobody was even able to tell her if the papers she had been working on that day had ever been sorted, indexed, copied, stamped, and filed.

You can see this particular story in a video version that was created for Risk Summit 2012:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ae_pOwKIUU