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**Warning Signs – How They May be Ignored Module**

**Onus of Proof**



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Safety Talks

Warning Signs – How They May be Ignored Module

Onus of Proof Support Material

**Script**

In 1996 the Gretley Coal Mine in NSW suffered an accident in which four men drowned.

They had been mining towards old abandoned flooded workings. And water was seeping out of the mine face, which should have been an indication that they may have been dangerously close to old flooded workings. They ignored those warnings and continued mining and broke through into the old workings and a vast amount of water came in and four miners were killed.

My question is why are warnings ignored? And the basic answer is that there is a culture of denial in many organisations - A culture of denial, which is functioning to suppress the significance of warnings.

What do we mean by culture? Whenever the word culture is used, it’s important to understand just what the word refers to.

And what I am referring to when I speak of culture here is a series of beliefs. It’s a series of four beliefs, which enable people to dismiss the significance of warnings.

A fourth aspect of the cultural denial is the onus of proof.

When we have an ambiguous warning sign where does the onus of proof lie? Should it be with the people who are drawing attention to the warning sign? And should we assume that the situation is safe until they have made the case that no it is dangerous? Or should we, once the warning sign has been drawn to our attention, should we assume it is dangerous until we can prove that it is safe?

Clearly we want the latter, we want to assume dangerous until proven safe. Until we do further work to prove safe. Unfortunately, it is usually the other way around. It is assumed safe until further evidence comes to the fore to prove that it is dangerous.

In the case of Gretley finally, they got to the point of saying to themselves we better do something about this. Let us drill ahead of where we are working, to see if we are closer to the old workings than we think we are. But we will start the process of drilling ahead in two weeks time. And it was during those two weeks that they broke through.

**Suggested Discussion Questions and Answers**

1. Identify two activities where we need to apply the onus of proof approach?

* Confined space: Contaminants
* Isolation of machinery

1. What is the onus of proof for each activity?

* Air sample taken, analysed and reported
* Equipment de-energised and padlocked