

What Do You See?

Ron Widup, Shermco Industries

You go through life every day, and in a blink, what exactly is it that forms your opinions and actions?

As we journey through our careers in the electrical power business, there are many experiences and challenges that help mold and create our opinions, knowledge, experiences, and actions. One only has to get shocked one time on a 277-volt lighting circuit to figure out real fast that is not something that you want to experience on a regular basis.

Your first impression of a real-life situation in the field can be critical in determining the steps you have to take to protect yourself, your coworkers, your customer's people, and the very equipment you are there to service or repair. How you interpret the data that first enters into your mind can have far-reaching effects as to whether or not you go home at the end of day. For example, if you do not understand the differences between a low-voltage bus assembly and a medium-voltage bus assembly, then how can you be expected to determine the correct tools and equipment to service and repair this type of equipment?

OSHA states that people are to be "qualified" for the task. Their definition of qualified is "One familiar with the construction and operation of the equipment and the hazards involved." If you are qualified, then your first impressions related to a medium-voltage bus assembly will likely be much different than the unqualified person. Small nuances such as insufficient clearance to grounded structures or a white power residue at bus transition pieces can mean the difference between quality work and marginal performance.

Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* suggests that jumping to conclusions may not necessarily be a mistake, as we rely on snap decisions far more than we appreciate. He goes on to say that we suffer under the delusion that most of our important decisions are made in a very rational, deliberate way, but those delusions

are just not true. We make powerful decisions (about people) in an instant, and we don't generally go back and change our minds.

It is suggested that a decision made in the first two seconds of exposure can be just as good as a decision made over a long period of time with lots of information. When you apply this theory to electrical safety then it seems logical that how you initially interpret your situation in the first few seconds of exposure is critical, and the situation can be reasonably assessed without much data – provided you understand what

you are exposed to and the potential hazards that exist.

So how does one get proficient at establishing a safety culture and understanding in a blink? The formula appears to be fairly simple, though not so simple to maintain. The foundation that OSHA requires of you to be qualified does not end once you understand the differences between low- and medium-voltage bus assemblies but gets expanded upon as you gain more field experience

and job knowledge. Only through constant and consistent training and education can one continue to get *more* qualified. You can be trained on 277-volt lighting circuits and become "qualified," but if you don't take your training and knowledge deep enough to understand lifting a neutral wire can impress 277-volts upon your body..... did you make a snap decision to lift the wire without having enough knowledge to know better?

So when you look at the photo in the center of the page, did you think it was a kid having fun on a 4-wheeler, or did you blink (as I did) and think it was the very reason why we need to consistently educate and train ourselves on the electrical power systems that we work on every day. Because if you don't, it can have far-reaching effects on your family, your coworkers, and your customers. When you blink, blink safely. 🚫



What do you see in this photograph?