

What is Complacency?

Complacency can be defined as self-assurance accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies. Complacency can be extremely dangerous and has been identified as one of the most significant barriers to maintaining safety in the workplace.

There are many contributing factors, and complacency may not always look the same.

You may have heard “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” or “I don’t care how you do it, it just needs to get done”. These statements are examples of two types of complacency that can be described as resistance and urgency.

When we resist change, we resist learning. The longer we continue to do things the same way, the more likely we are to become complacent and ignore or fail to recognize hazards.

When we are pressured to perform or produce, we start to ignore the risks associated with the task to get things done as fast as possible.

Why is it Dangerous?

Often, complacency does not become apparent until there has been a near-miss or an incident.

It is not uncommon for incident reports to determine “lack of attention” as one of the contributing factors. This can be characterized by a person working in “auto-pilot” mode or taking shortcuts and, therefore, likely taking unnecessary risks.

Complacency can result in serious incidents in a number of ways. For example:

- A worker neglects the inspection procedure for a piece of equipment, becomes used to unusual quirks and noises, and continues to work as normal until the equipment fails, resulting in the worker being injured.
- A crew required to work at heights is pressured to complete a project and is not given the time or resources to install an appropriate anchor point. They continue without incident. A new crew member is hired and is never taught the correct way to tie off, resulting in a fall and injury.

What Causes Complacency?

Complacency in the workplace can occur when a person or organization forgets to be afraid of commonly encountered hazards or becomes overly confident that all possible hazards are adequately controlled.

We often come to underestimate the risks associated with routine tasks; this is especially concerning when those routine tasks are performed in a changing environment.

Safety culture can also largely contribute to complacency at any level in an organization. Over time, personnel can come to accept ineffective systems and insufficient resources.

Even when systems and resources are adequate, complacency can still occur if deviation from best practices becomes normalized. On the other hand, an organization that believes it is already safer than others can become overconfident and unwilling to thoroughly examine its own program or conform to industry standards.

What Can Be Done?

To address workplace complacency, examine the safety management system, as well as people’s attitudes and willingness to participate in it.

One way to address the problem before it occurs is to identify complacency itself as a hazard during risk assessments. When creating a job plan, ensure all workers are involved and aware. It is important to consider during the job planning what *could* potentially go wrong.

Encourage workers to observe and check in on each other. This practice raises both our own and our coworkers’ awareness.

Regular change in routine is a helpful way to keep people engaged in their work and require them to pay attention to the task at hand.

Point to ponder: “How we do anything is how we do everything”

Sources

<https://www.safer.me/toolbox-talk/workplace-complacency/>

<https://www.cer-rec.gc.ca/en/safety-environment/safety-culture/safety-culture-learning-portal/safety-culture-threat-complacency.html>