

Workplace complacency - understanding the risks for both employer and employee



You have been working at heights for the past 10 years. The company has a strict rule that when you climb up and down the ladder, a colleague must keep the ladder steady. Despite this rule, you often climb up and down a ladder without waiting for a colleague to come and hold the ladder.

Today you again climbed up without a buddy holding the ladder. As you descend, you lose your balance and hit the ground head first.

What would it mean to you if you can never work again? What would it mean to your family?

Complacency manifests itself in different ways and can be anything from a near miss to a fatality.

In the context of workplace complacency, in this article we discuss the organisational risks for both employer and employees in line with *occupational health and safety requirements*.

What is complacency?

According to Merriam-Webster, complacency is self-satisfaction accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies. In short, complacency is what you feel when you are in a comfort zone, ignorant of the potential hazards around you.

The Oxford dictionary defines a system as a set of principles or procedures according to which something is done, an organised scheme or method. Therefore, whether it is a safety system, an operational system, a quality system or data system, a system is a method used to perform work.

What are the causes of workplace complacency?

Let us consider what causes complacency in the workplace and explore why a system can contribute to complacency.

When searching the internet or so called information highway with keywords 'complacency in the workplace', you will find a vast number of causes, including low safety standards, loss of passion for work, shortcuts, lack of interest, failure to implement corrective actions, and so much more.

Accordingly, some of the primary causes of complacent behaviour may also lie with management and an over-reliance on the available systems.

Secondary causes can include the following:

- Performing the same mundane task over and over without any change in routine or pace;
- Focusing on productivity and output, and chasing the numbers;
- Challenges at home following employees to work and mobile devices in their pockets, resulting in them being distracted;
- Feeling undervalued and overlooked for promotions, resulting in employees disengaging from the workplace;
- Performing the tasks with a disregard for their own wellbeing or that of their colleagues.

Besides being oblivious to the reality around them, there is a lack of motivation associated with an employee in a comfort zone.

What are the interventions for complacency in the workplace?

When the outcomes of the system result in complacency, an intervention is required. We have two options:

- Shock the system back into place with drastic measures. This will apply when most people in the organisation are just skimming by daily. It will be a complete system review, with induction and training for everyone within a short period of time. You will be calling in the cavalry, as your aim will be to get this done within 6 weeks or sooner.
- Take it slowly with small corrections every day. When only a few people are in a comfort zone from time to time, you will first identify who is being complacent, then investigate the cause, and finally start making the changes.

You will initially review the system to determine who is affected and then train the complacent persons. Thereafter the rest of the system will be reviewed in chunks.

Both options have merit. The severity of the complacent behaviour in your organisation will determine how drastic the changes must be.

What are the preventative measures that can be taken to minimise workplace complacency?

Well, as they say, prevention is better than cure. If your organisation has been reset, or is not yet nearing complacency, how can you prevent your team from becoming dangerously comfortable?

Again, the internet has many tips on how to avoid complacency, including having a mission statement, creating accountability, correcting bad habits, doing on-the-job hazard analysis, creating meaning, encouraging collaboration and supervision.

Almost every source stipulates that training is key, in one way or another.

We need to train, and train and retrain. Training, however, can easily become a trap for complacency. Thus, who should receive what training, and how should training be conducted?

- Training should start with management and supervisors. It should include skills development in different aspects, including emotional intelligence, risk management, leadership, communication strategies and disciplinary procedures. The training should involve self-study, face-to-face as well as reading, writing and practical assessment.
- Staff are trained next. Skills should include self-awareness, risk identification, communication strategies and job-specific training. Again, the training must include self-improvement, face-to-face presentations, and job assessment.

Next is changing the routine. In most instances, this means switching the teams around, having them start in different positions in the production line, or letting the accountant review the company policy. However, only change routines if it is safe to do so. Allowing someone to learn a new skill helps to encourage them, but it may put them at a higher risk of injury, thus training and supervision are essential.

Review your system, especially the areas relating to monitoring. We all know how quickly we lose interest when we complete the same checklist day after day.

- Ideally, you want your checklists to change. Yes, certain elements are key to an inspection; however, checking the oil in your car everyday if the car is serviced and well maintained is not really worth the time. So, establish what needs to be checked every day, every other day, once a week, once a month, bi-annually or annually. This will already offer variety in the most mundane of activities.
- Another option is to have a colleague check your equipment at random intervals, to help you stay safe and focused. Doing an equipment check in the same format as one would do a stocktake can also help identify potential hazards.

Ensure that you set S.M.A.R.T (Simple, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) goals for your organisation. The goals that are set often include reducing the number of injuries sustained during a year or improving our compliance rating. And yes, these are great goals to have, but what are your team's goals?

- What does the guy on the ground want to achieve? Is it aligned with your organisation's goals?
- Before you set your organisational goals for the next term or year, let your supervisors establish what the goals are that their team members want to achieve and then see how you can align the goals of the employees with the goals of the organisation to optimise buy-in from everyone in the company.

Audit the performance of your system regularly. We cannot sit around and wait for the external auditor to show up and ask questions.

There are different audits you can do, so get creative. Here are a few I can recommend:

- Departmental audits, where different departments in the organisation audit one another.
- Procedural audits, where you audit the validity of a specific operating procedure.
- Emergency drills are an assessment of the efficiency of your emergency system.
- Incident audits, where you audit the findings and the actionable items and measure the result.
- Employee audits, assessing them through observation and ensuring that you focus on positive reinforcement instead of diminishing statements.
- Lastly, ask a colleague to observe and review your operational procedures to ensure that everyone can understand them.

Continuous improvement is a major component evaluated during an audit for an ISO (International Standards Organisation) or Compliance System. Thus, how can we ensure continuous improvement? The general idea is to follow the PDCA cycle of Plan, Do, Check, Act, and repeat.

Important tips on avoiding workplace complacency

Below are a few tips that can be applied in the context of minimising workplace complacency.

Set your SMART goals and share them with the relevant parties affected by the goals, as set goals are often dependent on someone else.

- Focus on the development of management, the supervisors, and employees.
- Monitor the progress. Whether it is to assess the goals, the reports, actionable items, or audits, monitor what you plan to achieve.
- There will be shortcomings, there will be gaps, there will be errors. This is only a problem if you do not take action. Any deficiency must be corrected immediately, before it results in a major incident.

During a project, a contractor is busy installing a roof. The employees are walking about on the walls three stories up, while the roof trusses dangle from the crane. There is no PPE or fall-prevention mechanism in place. When the contractor is approached by the Safety Office with a request that his workers come down and implement the necessary precautions, he said, "I have been doing this for 20 years, what do you know?" If one worker falls and sustains a head injury, or breaks their neck or even dies, what is he or his family to do?

In conclusion

Complacency in the workplace can have detrimental implications for an organisation.

SERR Synergy assists businesses with innovative Occupational Health and Safety solutions by integrating compliance into business objectives and activities.

About the Author: Ilse-Marie Iding is an experienced National HSE Manager, who started her career as a Human Resources and Industrial Relations Practitioner in 2007 and her career at SERR Synergy in 2016 as an Occupational Health and Safety Practitioner. She holds a degree from the University of Pretoria and University of South Africa. With a passion for people and their well-being, she encourages professional and personal development to ensure growth and continuous motivation. Leading by example, she has also obtained various certificates relating to, among others, International Standards, Behaviour-Based Safety and NEBOSH. She is currently studying towards an International Diploma in Safety Management at NEBOSH. As a professional Health and Safety Practitioner, she is registered with SAIOSH.

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