

# TerranearPMC Safety Share

## Week of January 20, 2014 – Complacency

Recently, I came across an article by Larry Wilson, an expert in Behavior-Based Safety, that described a terrible accident involving a flatbed transport truck (18-wheeler) hitting a man on a mountain bike, who was crossing the road in broad daylight. The truck wasn't speeding. So how does an accident like this happen? Was the truck hidden from view? After all, the cyclist must not have seen the truck approaching. How can you not see a big transport truck coming towards you?

Chances are, the bicyclist was complacent. You've got to be pretty complacent to not see a transport truck. He must not have even looked. Quite possibly just a quick glance would have been enough. If he had slowed down enough to get that quick look, he'd still be alive.

These types of incidents happen thousands of times a day all over the world. It has been said that complacency contributes to more unintentional deaths than anything else, especially when you combine it with rushing, frustration or fatigue.

How do people get so complacent that they don't look for oncoming vehicles or they fall asleep at the wheel? Why do people get so complacent that they don't even think about the risks associated with whatever they are about to do? How do people get so complacent that they will do something that they know contributes to making an error such as texting while driving, or to not use a safety device, such as a fall arrest harness that reduces the risk if they if they do happen to make an error with balance, traction or grip? These types of errors are referred to in the business of Behavior-Based Safety as "mind not on task." The bottom line is, how can we stop our complacent behavior?

Complacency is defined as, "a feeling of contentment or self-satisfaction, especially when coupled with an unawareness of danger, trouble, or controversy." Once a concern for performing a task is no longer a concern, our minds tend to wander. And when you're thinking about something other than what you're doing at the moment, your most important asset – your star player – is sitting on the bench.

While our mental attitude is indeed our most important safety "device," we don't always think we need to be cognizant about what we are doing. After all, routine tasks become second nature. So why do we need to concentrate on something we feel doesn't require our full attention? We can all do lots of things on auto-pilot. So the first thing people need to do is recognize or accept that their mind will wander when they're engaged in an activity that they've done many times before. It's going to happen. It happens to everybody. It doesn't make you a bad person – just a dead one, a disabled one, or a lucky one.

When we perform a task – any task – we need to make sure our safety habits are functioning. This means moving your eyes before you move your hands, feet, body, or car; testing your footing or grip before you commit your weight to it; looking at your second foot as you step over a cord or something on which you could trip (it is usually the second foot you're not paying attention to that gets caught or hung up); looking twice when the sun is in your eyes to make sure you didn't miss something; lightly touching something before you grab it if it might be hot and, finally – sadly, in the case of the mountain biker – habitually looking at the line-of-site or what might be coming at you at blind intersections. Because if you don't see what might be coming at you, it could easily be the last mistake you'll ever make.



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Something that we can do to help us avoid our natural complacency is to watch other people for “state of error” risk patterns. Every time you see one, it will automatically make you think more about what you’re doing. And, if what you see is sensational enough, you’ll do more than think about it; you’ll actually react to it. For instance, instead of just driving on auto-pilot, take a few moments to watch other drivers. As you do, you will probably notice a fellow driver trying to look at a piece of paper inside a folder while talking to someone on the phone. Chances are, you’re going to speed up, slow down, or even move to another lane to get away from this person.

But if you didn’t look or don’t get into the habit of looking around, then you wouldn’t necessarily take yourself out of the line-if-fire. Therefore, working on safety-related habits by noting the error patterns of others can help to compensate for complacency leading to “mind not on the task” errors as this helps to refocus on the risk of what you’re doing at the moment.

Complacency can also influence our decision-making abilities. Such is what happens with trusting something important to memory. This can be as simple as forgetting to bring a lifejacket for everyone in the boat, to something more complicated, such as remembering a change to a well-established routine (driving to and from work). In some cases, the consequences are just wasted time or wasted money. In other situations, the consequence can be much more serious. Such is the unfortunate statistic of approximately 100 children/infants per year that die in Canada and the US of hyperthermia because they fell asleep in their car seats and their parents forgot they were in the vehicle.

Another problem complacency causes is with recognizing change. We can work at a specific project site every day for months performing the same operation. However, should one thing change, such as a piece of equipment was replaced or a vehicle parks in a different location, causing us to walk down a new path; or even having a new crew member assigned to the project – we are working in a potential at-risk scenario. In the case of a new team worker, we may not see or understand that this person communicates differently or does not understand the accepted field jargon. Maybe a new piece of equipment is onsite, and while the equipment is from the same manufacturer and even the same model as the previous piece of equipment, it may not operate exactly the same; yet, if we have a complacent attitude, we will not recognize the specific nuances attributed to such subtle differences and therefore, placing us in a disadvantageous situation – one that could result in misuse of equipment, or having new field workers perform a task out-of-sequence or incorrectly: all of which can lead to unfortunate outcomes because we did not recognize our scenario – we were operating on auto-pilot.

Another interesting point is that complacency is integrally linked with overconfidence. For instance, a good swimmer might be less inclined to wear a life jacket, or an experienced ironworker may decide not to wear a fall arrest harness, especially if he were only 6-10 feet above ground. Yet, experienced swimmers do drown and seasoned ironworkers have fallen to their death.

Complacency is far-reaching. We are human and that means we are fallible – no matter how smart, or experienced we may be. It is up to us, as individuals, to recognize repetitive or mundane tasks which can lure us into the dangerous world of “mind not on task.” Before we begin a task or during the morning tailgate meeting, or during our 2-minute drills, we need to recognize activities that can put us into a complacent attitude and discuss ways to keep us from falling into the hands of a quiet killer.

**True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice –Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

