

# TerranearPMC Safety Share

## Week of August 8, 2016 – Complacency

Within the field of occupational safety and health, there has been a growing concern regarding complacency. Accident investigations (in private industry and government operations alike) are showing an upward trend where "complacency" is listed as a contributory factor. Many perception surveys now ask workers if they have become complacent when doing repetitious jobs and if complacency is considered an undesirable characteristic of a safety culture. Although this attention to complacency is deserved, the standard solutions to improve this condition appear to fall short in almost all instances. Complacency is a state of mind and is probably not necessarily the only influence on safety choices or behaviors.

What is complacency? Well the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “self-satisfaction especially when accompanied by unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies.”

Using the Merriam-Webster definition, we can understand that unsafe acts (speeding, multiple lane changes, backing without looking, etc.) may be a result of drivers becoming complacent with their driving habits. As such, drivers begin to rely on their past experiences and skills to complete future tasks. The result of these actions could be what leads to the next incident. And depending on the specific events of the incident, the results can be far-reaching.

There are many causes of complacency and those reasons can be different for each person as everyone has different goals, needs, and values. Therefore, according to S&H training organizations, training and safety programs need to be adjusted for each person so everyone’s needs are met. The following are some top causes that may lead to complacency:

1. Repetitive functions on a continual basis without incident
2. Focus on production and not safety (shortcuts, risky behaviors)
3. Management does not expect high safety performance
4. The company does not review each accident/behavior in the same manner. Therefore, changes usually occur *after* a serious accident or injury.
5. Employees are not corrected after unsafe behaviors are noted
6. Distracted driving

While a “cure” for complacency cannot be easily summed up, effective corrective actions may be achieved through deliberate, continued effort in applying safety strategies and habits to the operation. For instance, an organization needs to remain focused on continuous improvement strategies and not merely rely on past successes. The continued efforts could include the following:

1. Focus on self-improvement
2. Safety training (continued training programs)
3. Share all safety concerns and safety information
4. Correct unsafe behaviors
5. Create high performance standards and enforce them



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There is a fine line with being content and becoming complacent while each person controls whether or not complacency creeps into home life, work life, as well as other areas. The focus should be on what is ahead, the next load, the vehicles in front of them, how to secure loads, and other several thousand decisions made each day on the road. The management team can act as motivators, mentors, and trainers to each employee and therefore, have an influencing impact on reducing complacency within the organization. We should always keep in mind that it is not just our work that relies on our attentiveness, but our families as well.

One of America's modern disasters, made famous by the legendary singer/songwriter, Gordon Lightfoot with his song, "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald" tells the tale of a freighter ship transporting iron ore from Duluth, Minnesota to Detroit, Michigan on the Great Lake, Superior.

As the story has been documented, it was on November 10, 1975, when the Great Lakes freighter, the SS Edmund Fitzgerald, along with its entire crew of 29 perished to the bottom of Lake Superior. Although the United States Coast Guard (USCG) noted severe weather, the USCG did not broadcast that all ships should seek safe anchorage until after 3:35 p.m. This was many hours after the weather was upgraded from a gale to a storm. Captains of ships that made it to their destinations on that day described the conditions as a monster sea that washed solid water over the deck of every vessel out there.

Investigation reports indicated that there was no evidence of any governmental regulatory agency that tried to control vessel movement in foul weather; despite the known history of hundreds of vessels that have met disaster due to storms on the Great Lakes. On the contrary, the USCG took the position that only the captain could decide when it was safe to sail.

An investigation conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board noted that Great Lakes cargo vessels frequently used the same travel route on a consistent basis, regardless of weather conditions. As a result, complacency became an influencing factor such that the unvarying travel pattern perpetuated an attitude - for captain and crew alike - to work on "auto-pilot." Such an attitude reduces the crucial awareness needed to function in extreme weather conditions and even, quite possibly, generate an overly optimistic attitude.

Independent investigations accused the USCG that it "laid bare its own complacency." This included the USCG's lack of rescue response which was manifested in their rescue vessels being unlikely to reach the scene of an incident on the Great Lakes within 6 to 12 hours of an occurrence. Thus, complacency, in this tragic event, can be seen through the reluctance of governmental agencies to maintain preparedness procedures, while the captains of the individual ships, relying on the routine trip schedules.

While one may conclude that complacency, by itself, is typically not a root cause of an accident (in the case of the Edmund Fitzgerald, the root cause was taking its trip in severe sea conditions), it plays a significant contributing factor: so significant that through proper attention to details, complacency can be controlled, and thus by controlling complacency, we can control accidents.

**Intelligence and courtesy not always are combined; Often in a wooden house a golden room we find** - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

