

# Safety & Training eSource Skilled



DECADES OF EXPERIENCE  
DEVOTED TO YOUR SAFETY.

A monthly resource for members of IMEA's Safety, Education & Training program.

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## BATTLING SAFETY COMPLACENCY IN THE WORKPLACE

One of the biggest problems faced in the midst of completing day to day tasks on the job is complacency. Employees become accustomed to doing things in a certain way or tasks flowing a certain way and grow oblivious to the hazards that may be ever present around them. This type of state of mind can affect many things including productivity, quality and safety.

Safety complacency in the workplace can be a literal killer on the job. All too often workers do not realize how complacent they actually have become until they have a near miss or close call; such events tend to jumpstart hearts and refocus proper attention, at least for a little while, to the importance of tasks at hand. With complacency there is a sense of numbness that develops to hazards. Employers should be on guard to the onset of complacency in the workplace.

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## From the Desk of Duane Richardson

As we near the end of another year, we've seen the number of major injuries and fatalities climb higher and higher. That also means the number of minor injuries and near misses has climbed higher and higher. Why? Ask yourself this question, How many times have I been hurt when I was thinking about what I was doing and the risk of what I was doing at the exact instant when I got hurt?

If you're like most people, the answer is zero or very close to it! To give you an example: 1,270 Linemen were surveyed and asked that same question and out of 1,270 linemen asked, only - 2 instances out of 1,270 careers. Or, given that the average age was 40-45, that's only 2 instances in 50,000 years.

So, for all intensive purposes you can probably count on complacency being a contributing factor (major or minor) in virtually every acute injury you and your employees have ever experienced on or off the job. So, complacency leading to mind not on task is huge. But how do you fight it? All utilities are aware of the problems complacency causes but the strategies they adopt to fight it are questionable in some cases and laughable in others. We tell our employees not to become complacent, was the answer a supervisor gave me when I asked him about it. He might as well have said, "Try not to get any older while you're at it."



*IMEA Board & Staff Would Like To Wish You & Yours A Very Merry Christmas & A Happy New Year 2019~*

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# Complacency: Safety's Worst Enemy

Safety has many enemies - budget, schedule, regulatory ignorance and leadership indifference, to name a few – or maybe saying complacency is its worst enemy is a bit of hyperbole. Then again, maybe it's not.

Each of the examples I mentioned is lacking one key ingredient that sets complacency apart from the rest: a false sense of security. When money, time, or enforcement becomes an obstacle to safety, the workforce will usually know this. If they continue to do their job, it is probably with added measures of precaution. And, while heightened awareness alone does not make for satisfactory protection, it is better than nothing. Similarly, if a worker is not aware of safety regulations, it does not mean that he or she does not know how to work safely, it just means that they are not aware of the government's specific requirements. That worker will most likely know or at least feel that something is unsafe and try to protect himself or herself in some way. I'm not saying that the solutions they choose will be perfect, or even very good, but awareness will always increase your odds of working without incident.

## What is Complacency?

Then there's complacency. Complacency occurs when you've been doing something one way for so long without incident that you assume there can never be an incident. Whatever it is that you're doing must be effective because, until now, there have been no issues. It's the classic "I've been doing it this way for 20 years, and nothing has ever happened to me" Syndrome. This frustrates safety professionals because we know that nothing ever happens to anybody – until it does. In other words, every single person that has ever been injured or killed on the job could have said – until that point – that this is the way I've always done it and nothing has ever happened to me.

## A Deadly False Sense of Security

A false sense of security does not go well in any industry, but it could be most dangerous in construction where things are constantly changing. The environment you are working in today could be a completely different environment than the one you worked in yesterday. A new excavation could have opened up next to you or a crane pick could be going on above you. Electrical equipment that was not energized yesterday might be energized today. That perimeter cable that was nice and taut yesterday, might have been loosened for some reason since then and left that way.

In a constantly changing environment, extra vigilance is needed, but workers still become complacent. Inspections fail to happen and workers walk or move equipment without looking where they're going, to the point where, from a safety standpoint, they seem to be sleepwalking through the job.

That's not to say that complacency isn't a problem in other industries. Take the worker on a manufacturing floor for example. He or she has inspected this same piece of equipment every single day for the last five years. There has never been a problem. The worker decides to blow off an inspection and get right to work. Then another. Soon, he or she is only inspecting every other day. Maybe even less frequently.

Then something happens.

It could be a fire. It could be somebody getting injured because a machine guard was missing. It could be any number of things, but whatever those things are, they were brought on by complacency.

## Tips for employers to curb complacency on the job are:

- **Share the Mission**— Remind employees of the company's purpose and goals so they maintain a connection to the larger missions and emphasize that their behaviors have an impact.
- **Avoid Routines**—Repetition can be related to complacency, if possible change up some of the tasks required to add variety to an employee's job.
- **Encourage Observation** - Have employees briefly stop work and observe the actions of other as they work, observing others raises one's own awareness as well as the awareness of co-workers
- **Correct Poor Performance**— Mentoring programs and coaching help employees identify and change troubled practices and potential problems.

Bringing in someone from outside the utility industry can often help, because they'll more easily notice things that your in-house staff who work there every day may miss. To schedule an appointment with our IMEA staff please contact Duane Richardson at [duane@imea.com](mailto:duane@imea.com).

